always be my baby

tabithatwo

Yellowjackets (TV) Complete

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Summary

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Description:

All the living yellowjackets are forced together when someone decides to unearth their past. Tensions rise, past relationships are revealed, and new ones are forged in a reunion that no one asked for (except maybe Misty).

or

Shauna’s world is rocked when Jackie Taylor walks back into it.

post s1 adult timeline divergence fic

1. bridge the gap

1996

Shauna jolted awake, gasping wildly for air. Timber creaked around her, pressure built in her ears, and—

Sharp, why was the air sharp?

Her lungs stung on her inhales, ached on her exhales. She pressed a hand to her chest to soothe the pain, but it did little more than remind her how thin her filthy sweatshirt was. It was freezing. Shauna squeezed her eyes shut against the sudden brightness, light that was eerie in its presence this long after the dark and dreary turn of fall. It'd been dull for weeks—the sun hiding behind a sheet of gray, the wind knocking crisp leaves off of the plants, shaking needles loose from the pines—so why was it suddenly so—

The cabin creaked louder, angrier, its old wood straining against a new gust of wind.

Jackie.

Shauna was upright in a second—sock-footed, wearing the same pair of Jackie's sweatpants that she'd been sleeping in all week. She'd slipped them on automatically, just before crawling under her pile of blankets in the chilly attic. It'd only been once she was already comfortable, her hands tucked under the waistband for warmth, that she'd remembered who they belonged to. She'd wondered if she should change out of them then, a fleeting thought that crossed her mind just before she drifted off, but she'd decided that changing them was more dramatic than not. Shauna hadn't wanted to give Jackie the satisfaction.

Now, she yanked those sweats up to avoid slipping on them as she ran toward the door. She let the ladder down with a *thunk* that rivaled the groaning of the cabin and slammed her body, swollen and aching, down it as she tried to clear her mind. The sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach grew deeper with each step, one that Lottie would call *an omen* and Taissa would call *a normal fucking reaction.*

It was too bright. Shauna reached the main floor and sprinted across it, stumbling over limbs and blankets. Most of the girls ignored her panic, grumbling their complaints as they attempted to readjust, but Shauna could hear the familiar hum of Taissa and Van mumbling to one another. She couldn't make out their words but, unlike the others, they sounded alert.

There was a lump in her throat, closing off her airway. It'd been building since the fight the night before, threatening to bring her to tears. She'd shoved it down, leaning on her anger like a crutch. By the time she'd awoken it'd grown, joined by the vice-like pressure in her chest, half frigid air, half blind panic.

Shauna yanked the front door open, its hinges squeaking as they slammed past their usual stopping point, and saw at once that she was right. It was too bright—far too bright, violently bright—because the morning sun was reflecting off of a foot of pure, undisturbed snow.

No. No, no, no, no, no.

She didn't realize that she said the words out loud as she ran, her volume pitching slowly from mumble to scream as the others gathered on the porch, wide-eyed and white-knuckled, to watch the inevitable unfold before them. Shauna had no room to be aware of them, no room to monitor her own behavior.

All she knew was Jackie. She ran to her, closing the distance between them and crashing to her knees. Her feet felt as though they'd caught fire—hot, rather than cold, her socks completely soaked through. She wouldn't have cared about the pain at all, if it hadn't forced her to wonder how Jackie's entire body must feel. God, Shauna hoped she was feeling this.

She clawed frantically at the snow, until she uncovered Jackie's face and chest. Snowflakes clung to Jackie's lashes like when they were kids, those winter days when Jackie stayed outside just a little too long, whining when Shauna begged to go back in. Except not like that. Not like that at all, because instead of wind-burned cheeks, so pink they almost looked red, Jackie's skin was blue-tinged. Her lips were blue too, parted like she might try and whisper something to Shauna if she got close enough, and her body was rigid.

Frozen.

Shauna could hear herself, suddenly. She listened to her own frantic cries echo off of the trees, the rest of the forest still and bare, the wind that had forced her awake since died down to nothing. It was just them. Only them.

"No, Jackie, no! Wake up, Jackie, wake up!"

She sounded like a feral and broken thing. She knew that she needed to get a grip, to stop shaking Jackie and start methodically uncovering her, but she'd lost control. All she could do was dig her fingers into Jackie's shoulders and howl.

Hands touched her everywhere, trying to pry her off of Jackie. Trying to take her away from Jackie. Shauna threw her body forward, jerked side to side, thrust an elbow back blindly, hit someone hard. It wasn't enough. She couldn't fight hard enough.

She woke some hours later, covered in the warmest blanket they had, laid out on the floor next to the fire. Her head ached. She reached up to touch the sore spot. Sticky. She held her fingers out in front of her. They were marked with what looked like old blood, browning and thick.

Shauna vomited. Then she remembered.

Jackie.

She tried to sit up, but a small, insistent hand held her down. Hovering over her was Misty fucking Quigley, worrying her lip between her teeth. Her expression was almost appropriate, almost sympathetic, but her eyes held a glint of something else, something Shauna couldn't quite place.

"Where's Jackie?" Shauna demanded, startling at the slur in her own words. "Where is she? Where is she?"

Her sentences ran together, her throat tight, her sinuses full. She didn't know how to take in air, couldn't figure out how to fucking breathe.

“Shauna.” Misty pressed against her harder. “We need to talk. But you… you sort of lost it on us back there. I had to, um…”

She gestured vaguely at Shauna’s head, her short fingers wiggling slowly, and suddenly it clicked.

Misty had knocked her out. Smashed her fucking head in to sedate her. Misty had taken her away from Jackie. If it weren’t for Misty, Shauna would still be out there. She’d be laying down, curled around Jackie, waiting for the cold to paint her a matching shade of blue. Jackie and Shauna, always joined at the hip, Shauna following Jackie’s lead. Shauna would’ve followed her straight to—

Misty was still rambling. Shauna tried to shut out her squeaking voice. If she didn’t say it, Shauna could pretend that it wasn’t real. If she could just stop Misty from saying that Jackie was—

“So, you’ll understand, of course, if I’m hesitant to tell you this, what with you being a bit… unpredictable.”

Shauna didn’t want Misty to be the one to tell her this, couldn’t handle Misty being an integral part of the worst moment of her life.

“Misty!” Taissa snapped. She’d appeared out of thin air like a vision, like an answer to Shauna’s prayers. Her eyes were glassy and her throat was bobbing and her lower lip trembled, but it was Taissa. Shauna whimpered, shooting her a desperate look. “That’s more than enough from you.”

Tai pulled Misty away by the back of her collar, eyeing Van, who stepped in and steered her toward the kitchen. They whispered to each other, their voices low, but Shauna didn’t try to hear what they were saying. She didn’t care.

Shauna wanted Jackie. Wanted to hold her. Wanted to hold her while she was warm. She imagined picking her up, bridal style, and carrying her to the corner where they stacked what passed for clean blankets. She would lay Jackie down on the pile while Jackie giggled, calling Shauna a dork, calling her cheesy, and she’d slide in next to her. They’d pull the covers over their heads, just like they had when they were little kids. Shauna imagined touching her face, tracing the curve of her brow, brushing a thumb over her bottom lip. Wrapping her arms around Jackie, laying her head against her chest, listening to the steady thrum of her heart.

Shauna knew that none of that was going to happen.

“Shauna,” Tai said, choking back her own tears, “look at me.”

Shauna obeyed, even as her heart hammered in her chest, warning her against it.

Shauna didn’t remember Tai helping her sit, moving her away from the pool of her own vomit, but she must’ve, because now Tai was holding her upright, one hand on her shoulder, the other supporting her back. Tai’s touch was the opposite of Misty’s, miles away from Misty’s creeping hands digging into her collarbone, forcing her down. Tai was light and gentle and warm and everything Shauna didn’t deserve, because Shauna was the reason that —

“Oh, Shauna. Honey, she’s… she’s gone. Jackie’s dead.”

Shauna's world went black again.

PRESENT

Shauna's burner phone buzzed against her thigh. She slipped it out of her pocket and flipped it open, holding up a finger to Jeff when he gave her an inquisitive look. She carried it on her person now, resentfully, but she hadn't yet explained it to him. She'd been sitting pretty on her pedestal, enjoying the way the cards had somehow fallen in her favor. She'd cheated, she'd killed her lover, yeah, but she'd come clean when it counted. Jeff was sitting on years of lies, on blackmailing his own wife to cover his tracks. In their marital court, Shauna's crimes of passion had been eclipsed by his premeditation.

He knew Shauna and her old teammates had come together when he'd pushed them there with threatening messages, but a burner phone and secret meetings in diners sort of shattered the in-the-moment illusion that Shauna had curated. Her past was a shield when it came to Jeff, but every man must have his breaking point.

"Hello?" Shauna asked curtly.

"We have a problem."

Shauna's pulse quickened, because Misty hadn't bothered with a greeting. Misty loved a greeting. She liked to drag out an interaction, asking questions just so someone would follow their simple answer with a polite *"and you?"* and she could ramble on about her job or her bird or her fucking theories.

"What is it, Misty?" Shauna snapped. "I'm a little busy at the moment. We're… running errands."

It was late. Shauna and Jeff were at the furniture store, where they could talk freely without Callie listening in. Their inventory excuse had fallen flat when they'd given it, hurrying out the door and reminding Callie not to have anyone over while they were gone, but there was no need to come up with a better lie. Callie didn't have any recourse. She wasn't going to openly accuse them of what Shauna knew she suspected. Callie was sneakier than that. Her mother's daughter in that one, obnoxious way.

Jeff was fretting about the murder situation, namely Adam's face being plastered on the local news for the past twenty-four hours, and Shauna was trying to convince Jeff to leave it to her and not do anything stupid. A losing battle.

Shauna closed her eyes and pressed a hand to her lower back, still sore from leaning over the bathtub. Her arms ached from the repetitive sawing and her annoyance at the situation washed over her in a fresh wave. She knew that she should feel something else: remorse, fear, sadness. Anything.

But Shauna was fucking annoyed.

"Nat's gone," Misty squeaked.

Her mousey voice and her squawking bird in the background—predator playing as prey. Something acidic rose in Shauna's throat, coating her mouth.

“Gone? What the fuck do you mean by gone? Rehab gone?” Shauna asked. “Not answering your calls gone? Moved back to LA gone? What, Misty? That can’t be the end of the sentence.”

Shauna paced between two rows of barely-different black and beige armchairs, Jeff following her with his eyes and listening intently. She pursed her lips and clicked the volume down a notch with her thumb.

“I don’t want to say too much. I… not over the phone. I’m not even sure I should be saying this, but—” Misty gave a sharp inhale. It was a sound Shauna knew well: Misty torn between fear and excitement, trying to decide which to let win. “—I happen to know for a fact that she was taken by some group. Some… organization or something. And you may not *want* to, but you *need* to trust me. You don’t have any other options, really.”

Shauna scoffed, running a hand over the sticky faux leather of one of the shitty fucking chairs—no wonder nobody bought this shit—and slammed her eyes shut against the pain spreading through her temples.

“They were wearing the symbol,” Misty said.

Shauna froze.

“So, anyway, I’m packing a bag and heading to your house. We need to figure out next steps and I don’t know the best move yet, but we’re in danger. I *mean* it, Shauna.”

Excitement had won, in the end. Misty sounded as though she were suggesting a holiday. She was swinging into Shauna’s life like a goddamn wrecking ball, offering vague hints at things that could undo her completely, and she might as well have been asking her to go on a cruise.

Shauna tried to respond, but Misty pushed through, speaking impossibly fast, like oxygen was optional for her.

“And, listen, I know we haven’t done a great job keeping in touch these past few years—”

Twenty-five years of avoiding you, Shauna thought, *and yet here you fucking are.*

“—and I *swear* I was going to tell you this eventually. I hope you believe that. I just didn’t know how. But now it’s too late to find the best way to do it and—”

Shauna’s chest tightened. Whatever Misty was building up to, offering disclaimer upon disclaimer, her voice thick with an imitation of concern, Shauna didn’t want to hear it. She had bigger things to worry about, like who the fuck had taken Natalie and how the hell they were going to get her back (if Misty was telling the truth, that was).

“—I just have to say it. Try to stay calm, okay? Is there somewhere you can sit?”

“Just say whatever the fuck it is you want to say to me,” Shauna forced out, her jaw tense, *“now.”*

Jeff squeezed between two oversized chairs and dug his fingers into her free arm, trying to pull her closer.

“*What’s going on?”* he mouthed.

Shauna jerked her body out of his reach. There was a new ringing in her ears, high and persistent. She shook her head to clear it, but the movement served only to make it louder.

"Well, Shauna, the thing is, *this* is why no one wants to tell you things," Misty snapped back. "But, since it *is* pertinent information and I think you'll be better off hearing it from me now than discovering it yourself later… Jackie's alive."

Shauna laughed, quickly and coldly. There was no humor in it, but it overtook her body, her shoulders shaking and her chin tilting up. She stared at the tile ceiling. It was the ugly kind, off-white with dozens of little holes that made no fucking sense, because who needs holes in their ceiling? It was the type of paneling that you could lift away like it was nothing. There was no substance to it and Shauna wanted to rip it into tiny pieces just to prove how fucking useless it was and—

And Jeff was touching her—his sweaty palm planted on her forearm, his fingers wrapping around her and trapping her—and Misty was squeaking in her ear again.

"Shauna? Shauna, are you alright? Oh, I knew I shouldn't have told you over the phone."

"You're sick—you're—you're—that's not… fucking funny."

Shauna felt herself being knocked off center, but she clung to reality, her nails biting into her palm. Jeff supported some of her weight, gripping her arm harder. Her eyes stung. She wanted him off of her. She wanted Misty out of her fucking life. She wanted…

Jackie.

Shauna, forever wanting what she couldn't have. Forever clinging to memory. Forever desperate.

But Jackie was dead and Misty was a lying cunt.

"You're cruel or you're… fucking crazy."

Shauna was not about to believe Misty fucking Quigley. She'd seen Jackie's body, blue and frozen and lifeless. She'd held onto her corpse until the other girls had pried her grip loose and pulled her away. She'd missed her, mourned her, convinced herself that she could talk to her.

Misty wanted something from her and Shauna didn't know what, couldn't understand why Misty thought that torturing her would force her to produce it. She wrenched her arm out of Jeff's grip—his hand was overlarge and calloused and making sick rise in her throat—and walked further down the aisle.

"Shauna," Misty tsked, "I know you're in shock, so I won't take offense. But I'm not lying, I'm not crazy, and I'm *certainly* not trying to be cruel. I'm *trying* to be kind. I've had my suspicions for years, but now I *know* it's true. We really don't have time to hash this out, I just wanted you to be prepared. We can talk more when you get home."

Shauna was developing a deep, throbbing headache. It pressed up from the base of her skull and coursed through her. She rubbed at her neck, tilting her head side to side in search of relief. She needed to say something, anything, to keep this moving. To stop thinking about *her.* Her gold-rush hair and her wide doe eyes and her sugar-sweet tongue and— *fuck.* Shauna had thought about Jackie for too long. She was there now, waving at Shauna to catch her eye

from where she sat, perched on top of the tall counter that housed the register. Her feet swung back and forth, her heels knocking into the chipped white laminate.

It isn't real, it isn't real, it isn't real.

"Callie's at the house," Shauna said. "I—she was supposed to be out tonight, but her boyfriend broke up with her. She's at… home."

Mentioning Callie had been a mistake, but it was too late. She'd let it slip, her mind scattered. She felt her mind trying to slip away, a grace that she absolutely couldn't allow herself, because even if *this* wasn't real, this bullshit that Misty was forcing her to listen to, the danger was. Shit had been stirring up for weeks. Nat being… taken by some freaks who knew about the symbol lined up perfectly with the nightmare her painstakingly orchestrated *quiet life* had twisted into.

The headache was spreading, clawing desperately for her attention.

"Hello? Are you there?" Shauna heard Misty rustling around, fabric sliding and a zipper being pulled shut. "You head home and I'll meet you there. I couldn't get a hold of Tai, but I'll keep trying her."

Shauna's body began to move without the guidance of her mind. Her mind was busy, clinging to Misty's stupid, fucking lies. Her heart, too. Stirring. Fluttering, like it was waking up after a long stretch of sleep, testing things out. Warming up.

Shauna took one last glance at Jackie, her lips downturned in a dramatic frown, the one she always wore when Shauna ignored her presence. Shauna pursed her own lips in apology, pleading with her eyes. (Begging a fucking hallucination not to be upset with her, ignoring Jeff's apprehensive stare, the one *he* always wore when she was looking at nothing or talking to no one.)

"Okay. Okay, I'm going." Shauna motioned at Jeff, waving him towards the door.

He grabbed his keys and jogged over to her, his brows lifted in question. She read relief on his features, even in his confusion—relieved that she was no longer staring into space (at the girl sporting a disappointed pout and crossing her skinny arms).

"Jeff is with me," Shauna told Misty. "We're leaving now."

"Just be careful," Misty warned, that same bite of excitement seeping into her tone. "We don't know what we're dealing with yet."

"Wait, Misty?"

"Yeah?"

"How do you know my address?"

All Shauna got in response was a nasally giggle, followed by the silence of Misty cutting the call.

There was an accident on the highway. All but one southbound lane was closed, traffic forced to stop and start intermittently. Drivers were on edge, braking too abruptly, honking at the slightest indiscretion.

Shauna had called Callie after filling Jeff in, telling Callie to expect a friend of hers, desperately striving for a casual tone. It'd proved difficult to keep it casual, or clear for that matter, as she'd struggled with the wording: let an old friend of mine, who you've never met, inside, and no one else. But, after a handful of bitingly sarcastic comments and one line of questioning that moved dangerously close to *asking about Adam* territory, Callie had relented.

That was forty minutes ago. Shauna had called once and texted twice since then to check if Misty had arrived. She wanted to call over and over, to dial again the second the line stopped ringing. She would very much like to scream at Callie over voicemail, leaving her a nasty message that she would never listen to, because *nobody checks their voicemail anymore, Mom.*

But Shauna didn't trust Callie. If Callie heard the desperation in her mother's voice, if she realized that Shauna was frantic, there was a chance she'd do something insane, something other than what she was told, just to piss Shauna off.

Misty wasn't answering her phone either. She was probably driving. Shauna tried to soothe herself. She imagined Misty offering an explanation in her much too perky voice, shoving her glasses up at the side of one lens— *I once saw this article on the dangers of even having your phone near you when you're driving because it's just too tempting, so ever since then it's been in my purse! No accidents for me! We've had enough of those for a lifetime, right Shau—*

"Shauna?" Jeff asked wearily. "Are you—"

"No," Shauna snapped. "I'm not okay."

Shauna was putting her faith in Misty Quigley. Trusting *Misty* to protect her kid from whatever weird shit was going on. *Might be going on*, Shauna corrected herself, because Misty wasn't exactly a reliable source.

Jeff had wanted to talk about Jackie after Shauna'd recounted Misty's bullshit lies. Shauna had not. She'd won that careful battle.

Traffic started moving again as they passed the accident—four cars, one flipped on its side, the other three in various states of disrepair. All of the drivers and the passengers had been carted off already. Whether on a stretcher or in a body bag, Shauna couldn't tell. All that was left was the wreckage. Shauna stared openly as they passed, wondering what had to happen for four cars to be roped in like that. How many people had made mistakes at the same time to cause that kind of damage?

She clutched her phone tighter as they finally drove free of the closure, waiting for the ping that meant Callie had responded. It felt more urgent that she get a response, something about the movement of the car bringing her back into herself. She was less distracted, anxiety clawing at the spaces that resigned acceptance had abandoned.

Jeff glanced at her, his forehead creased. Not his concerned face, but his confused face. It pissed Shauna off. She turned away, focusing on the cars in the lane next to them. They drove slower than what was usual for this stretch of road. That's what people did when they saw

tragedy. They thanked God or the universe or whoever that it wasn't them, they pretended that they felt sorry for the poor suckers who did get hurt, and they were careful until they forgot. Most people had short memories.

"I'm sure she's fine, babe," Jeff offered, his eyes back on the road. "You know how she is about responding."

"Yeah, I do." Shauna tapped her phone against her thigh quickly. "I also know that Misty's a fucking psycho and this is a nightmare. Can't you drive any faster?"

"And get pulled over? No, Shauna, not really. I'm going eighty already and in case you don't remember—" He jerked the steering wheel sharply, swerving to cross two lanes. "—it would probably be a bad idea for us to have any run-ins with law enforcement right now."

Fucking idiot had almost missed the exit. She shouldn't have let him drive. Shauna scrunched her nose and gave a shallow sigh. Honestly, she wasn't sure she could've driven without drifting into oncoming traffic, but it felt good to pin it to Jeff.

"I remember," she said. "Trust me."

Shauna's phone lit up with a text from Callie before she could say anything else. She startled, fumbling and nearly dropping it in her haste. She read the message twice before she heard Jeff speaking.

"Well? What did she say?"

He must've asked her once already. There was an urgency in his tone that he reserved for special occasions: Shauna going catatonic, Callie having a pregnancy scare, finding out there was no book club. Those sorts of things.

Good, he should feel it too.

Shauna held the phone closer to her face to read the message for a third time, this time aloud:

"Fucking relax, Mom. I'm fine and your friend is actually sort of fun for someone your age, lol. Not sure where you were hiding this one and really not sure why she would even be friends with you. I even asked her if she had the right house. Told her what was up and she, like, immediately started blasting music and baking brownies. She even told me that she knew his dad when you guys were in school and he was a total loser, too. (Which is so true by the way, he's still a total loser.) And that I'm too pretty to cry over a boy. We're chilling. Get home whenever."

Shauna read it slowly, a riddle she was mulling over. She forced the inflection out of her voice, clearing her throat when she struggled to keep herself monotone.

"That… well…" Jeff was properly nervous now. He cracked his neck with a hand under his jaw, his fingers brushing over stubble where his skin was usually bare, and swallowed. She'd expected him to say something along the lines of *see, she's fine* but she found some solace in his concern, grateful that she wouldn't have to find a way to put the sinking feeling in her stomach into words that Jeff could comprehend. "That just… I mean, I don't know her super well, but… that doesn't sound like Misty, does it?"

"No," Shauna whispered.

She was starting to sweat. Her heart raced and, even though she felt like the air in the car was stale, too thick to breathe in, she couldn't bring herself to roll the window down. She didn't want the outside world to creep in just yet. She settled for pressing her forehead against the cool glass.

"I know you told me it isn't possible," Jeff said. "But, well… I—who does that sound like to you?"

Jeff was walking on eggshells, waiting for her to explode.

"It sounds like… her," Shauna relented.

She couldn't bring herself to say the name out loud, but internally, overcome with foolish devotion, she chanted it like a prayer: *Jackie, Jackie, Jackie.*

Her heart beat in time, contracting and releasing with each syllable. Jeff didn't respond. He gripped the steering wheel harder and took the turn onto their street. Shauna felt as though she may choke on some invisible object that had taken residence low in her throat—desire and shame and fear, twisted and knotted together, burrowing into her flesh.

Her head pounded harder. She had the acute and unsettling awareness of a woman whose mind was on the precipice of lost, but not quite gone.

She threw the car door open the moment they pulled into the driveway, one foot hitting the pavement before they came to a complete stop. The car rocked a little beneath her as she stepped out. The knotted, angry thing in her throat grew in size as Shauna accepted that it was no longer her daughter who she was running to.

She'd barely made it to the edge of the yard when she heard the muffled sounds of one of Callie's pop songs echoing from the kitchen, loud even with the shut and latched windows. She never allowed Callie to play her music like this. She knew she was a hypocrite—at Callie's age she'd played her music at piercing levels, ignoring her mom's gentle requests to *please turn it down*, but the albums she chose were usually a little less *happy.*

It was Jackie who would come over and put on something upbeat, cranking the volume even higher. Soundgarden would be replaced with the Spice Girls, Nirvana with Mariah Carey, 4 Non Blondes with TLC. And, as much as she resented it, Shauna's disgruntled pout was almost always replaced with a reluctant grin.

She would try her damnedest to avoid smiling, to hold her ground. She'd tried harder some days than others. The days she'd been subjected to Jackie excitedly describing the perfectly curated dance she and Jeff were planning on doing when Homecoming Court was announced, the days she'd watched Jeff peel his sweaty hand off the steering wheel, in favor of squeezing Jackie's thigh. Those days had been the worst, because Shauna could never stop imagining him touching her. His hands on her waist, in her hair, grabbing her face. Touching her in ways that only Shauna had until he'd come around. Sometimes she could've sworn she could see the outline of his greedy hands all over Jackie, his sticky palms leaving a residue on Jackie's perfectly tanned skin.

Those were the days she'd avoided eye contact when her CD was snatched out of the player and replaced. Shauna would make Jackie work for it those days, make her go through the routine until she found something that stuck.

Jackie would try singly loudly, sometimes badly, even though she was an annoyingly good singer. She'd march over to Shauna, lift her chin with careful fingers under her jaw, and force the eye contact she wanted. She would grin at Shauna, flash her that smile—the one that made Shauna's heart melt every fucking time. Most of the time that was where Shauna would break.

But on those awful days, when Shauna couldn't stop imagining Jeff digging his nails into Jackie's hips or slipping a hand up her skirt, the nausea had helped her hold out longer. Jackie would persist, always. She'd grab either side of Shauna's face and comb both hands through her dark hair. She'd lace her fingers together on the back of Shauna's head, holding the hair off of her face, massaging the nape of her neck slowly as she did it. Shauna would feel Jackie's eyes all over her, studying her carefully. Jackie'd seemed unworried about lingering looks. She'd touched her so sweetly, so lazily, like it was the most natural thing in the world to her. She'd touched her so differently than she'd touched Jeff, and whether Shauna thought that was a good thing or a bad thing depended on the day of the week.

If Shauna still held out, Jackie would push her further.

"*Why do you want to mope when we could be dancing?"*

If the music was loud enough, Jackie would have to lean against Shauna to say it, pressing her forehead to Shauna's temple, speaking firmly in her ear. Reliably stubborn, Jackie always pitched up the volume on the CD player after she changed it, even if it was just the slightest turn of the knob. Shauna would use it to her advantage sometimes, starting the sound high already, high enough that she could be certain she'd feel Jackie's breath on her cheek.

Shauna would hold her breath, praying that Jackie would choose something a little slower. Quick beats prompted Jackie to giggle, grasping Shauna's hands and forcing her to twirl. But slow songs? Slow songs meant Jackie's cheek and chest pressed against Shauna's own, her arms slung around Shauna's neck. As the years had passed, Jackie had started picking slow songs more frequently, her bar for what constituted a slow song dropping lower and lower.

Shauna would keep time with Jackie's selections— *Waterfalls* meant a solid three and a half minutes of their dance, once they'd gotten through the preamble. *Killing Me Softly With His Song* could stretch to four minutes of holding each other, if Shauna could establish her sour mood firmly enough. And it *would* turn into that, into holding each other, because Shauna had always caved and wrapped her arms around Jackie's waist, her fingers roaming over her back and hips, if only to hear and feel Jackie's contented sigh.

Jackie hadn't believed in playing sad music when you were already sad. She'd found it to be a complete oversight, a waste of a chance to force yourself to enjoy the moment anyway. When they were younger, that theory of hers had stayed generic. She'd announced it to anyone who would listen. If Jackie twisted her ankle, she'd hobble over to the radio and find a station playing Shania Twain. After assuring them that she was fine, she'd ease her friends' nerves—movie star grin on her face, shoulders wiggling to the beat—until they smiled with her. If she'd spent the entire night awake and exhausted, caring for a belligerently drunk Mrs. Taylor, she'd hop into Shauna's car the next morning and sing her heart out to Madonna. When someone's shitty boyfriend dumped them, it was Jackie who would pull them out of their funk: off with the sad movies and on with the full-out dance party— *we will not waste our precious time being sad about boys!*

But, as they'd aged, Jackie had been more explicit with what that meant for *them* in particular. Jackie would tell Shauna that she didn't like wasting their moments, blinking up at her through long lashes, winding persistent fingers through her hair. That she loved their time together, that they didn't need to wreck their shot at a good day by reinforcing the mood with something sad, that she wanted Shauna to be happy more than she wanted anything else.

It's what Shauna had loved about Jackie—her sweet friend, her spot of sunshine, her team captain. That was how Jackie was meant to be. It was who she was.

Logic hadn't prevented the hate that had crept in, though. Occasional bitterness so deep it shocked Shauna—a bitterness that she'd desperately tried to convince herself had nothing to do with how much Jeff had put his hands on Jackie that day. Sometimes Shauna had just wanted to be fucking sad. She'd wanted to be pissed, to allow herself to lean into the anger. But when Jackie was around, she would always coax Shauna back into the carefully curated atmosphere she'd learned to maintain. She would open her arms and Shauna would sink straight into them, shoving the resentment down until she could take it out later, alone in her room to examine it under the light, turning it over in her palms, searching for answers.

When Shauna heard the decidedly happy music coming from her house, her heart reacted first. It sank or leapt or… or something. Something jittery, something that she couldn't put into words. Her insides felt warped, as though her organs were moving around of their own accord, making space.

She tried to turn the doorknob. Locked. Of course it was, they always kept their door locked.

Shauna felt for her keys automatically, reaching for the purse that was usually over her shoulder. Her hand passed through empty air. She heard a slam—Jeff shoving the passenger door shut with a hip, his hands full. He was pale, his arms shaking and his Adam's apple bobbing, clutching the purse she'd forgotten. Shauna wished deeply that he were anywhere but there.

"Here," he mumbled, handing her his keys along with her purse.

Shauna's hands trembled so much she couldn't find the right key. She wondered why Jeff hadn't just unlocked the stupid, fucking door himself, until she realized she was standing so close to it that she was blocking the entrance with her body.

She needed to get a fucking grip. She ran an anxious hand through her hair. It snagged on the pin she'd used to hold her bangs back. Ripping the pin out and throwing it to the ground, she mussed her hair quickly, suddenly aware of what she looked like. A housewife. A boring fucking housewife. Her cheeks went hot with embarrassment, sweat collecting on her forehead. None of this fucking mattered. There was no fucking way she was… she was… there was no way.

Shauna finally managed to turn the key in the lock, the click she usually listened for buried by the sudden rush of noise. High-pitched vocals, a plucky beat. It was jarring, that music combined with the feeling consuming her, deep clawing anxiety, ripping her apart from the inside.

"Callie?" Jeff pushed past her. "Honey?"

He was searching for their daughter. Their daughter, whose wellbeing was in question. Their daughter, who Shauna had fully forgotten about until Jeff had called her name.

“We’re in here, Dad!” Callie sounded fine. Undamaged. Happy, even.

Shauna tried to force the relief she knew she should be feeling.

“Fuck, okay,” Jeff said. “Okay, good.”

Shauna had no clue what he would’ve done if Callie hadn’t been fine. Nothing, probably. No, Jeff would’ve frozen and Shauna would’ve been the one to act.

Shauna followed Callie’s voice to the kitchen. She sat at the island, smiling while she scraped the bottom of a mixing bowl with a rubber spatula, swinging her feet just like Shauna’s hallucination of Jackie had at Jeff’s store. Their fridge was open and someone was crouched in front of it. It definitely wasn’t Misty. This woman had straight, auburn hair. It was deep and dark and touched the base of her shoulder blades, even as she pitched forward.

Shauna drew in a shaky breath, one that didn’t have enough oxygen in it.

The woman turned to face them and Shauna dropped everything she’d been holding. Jeff’s keys clattered when they hit the ground. The contents of her purse—tissues, pens, the book she’d convinced Jeff she’d been reading for the last four “book clubs”—spilled out around her feet.

Decades older, hair completely different. Fuller figure and a red scar along the length of her left collarbone and smile lines and black-ink tattoos scattered across her arms like patchwork.

But… wide, beautiful eyes.

But… small, upturned nose.

But… the grin. The devastating, heartbreaking, trademark grin.

Jackie Taylor was standing up straight, now. Standing in their fucking kitchen. Holding a can of soda in one hand and pushing the fridge shut with the other. Smiling, like this was all normal. Like they were still friends and she was in their home all the time. Like she wasn’t fucking dead—all bones at this point—and buried somewhere in the Canadian wilderness.

Shauna wanted to speak. Wanted to scream. Wanted to shriek. She couldn’t remember how.

Jeff seemed to retain access to that part of his brain, if only enough to mutter in a choked-off voice: “Jackie?”

That set it in stone for Shauna. She wasn’t imagining things. Besides, if Shauna had been imagining this Jackie would’ve been younger. Shauna had never let herself imagine what Jackie would look like with age. She could never picture a Jackie Taylor who lived to be forty-three—smile lines pulling at her eyes, sun damage on her skin, hips full and rounded. Jackie remained eighteen, because that’s how Shauna had thought she’d gone out, frozen in time as a teenager.

Shauna wasn't doing mental gymnastics to force some random woman into looking like her, either. Because Jeff knew, too. And, even if he hadn't been there, Shauna thought she would've known. Jackie looked different enough that plenty of people who hadn't known her well wouldn't have recognized her, but Shauna *knew* her. Shauna had deeply, truly, shamelessly made a study of Jackie Taylor. The way she looked, the way she spoke, the way she moved. Shauna had quite literally taken notes on Jackie. She would've known.

"Hi," Jackie said simply.

One word. One stupid word. As if that was all the situation required. *Hi.*

Jackie set the soda down on the counter and reached for an unfamiliar phone on the counter. Without looking down, she managed to cut off the music that'd been feeding into their speakers. Callie was the first to react. While Shauna and Jeff stood still, rooted in place, she rose slowly.

"Um…" she hummed, looking at Jackie carefully. "Dad, did you just say Jackie?"

Jeff set Callie in motion with a single, affirmative nod. His mouth hung open, his eyes unblinking.

"Oh. My. God. You're Jackie?" Callie spun to face her, turning her back on her parents. "Like, *the* Jackie? Jackie Taylor, Jackie? Died in the woods, Jackie?"

Shauna felt the twisted knot in her throat unravel. There wasn't relief. It wasn't vanishing. It was simply unwinding to wrap itself around new parts of her. Spreading through her body and digging in and keeping her fucking immobile. She couldn't move, couldn't think, couldn't breathe.

"Well, clearly not, um, *dead,"* Jackie said. "But yeah. The one and only, I guess."

Her smile faltered. She stared at Shauna, studying her face just as she used to, begging for eye contact. Shauna couldn't give it to her. She kept scanning her body, everywhere but her eyes. *Anywhere* but her eyes.

"Oh my God, I should've known! I've only seen, like, a million pictures." Callie launched herself around the table. "It's the hair, I think. You look so different."

Callie hugged Jackie, throwing her arms around her neck with a little laugh.

"Oh," Jackie breathed quietly.

Her movement was delayed, a beat passing before she brought her hands up and squeezed Callie back. The hug only lasted a few seconds, but Shauna burned the entire time. She was stuck, her feet glued to the tile, while Callie hugged Jackie.

Callie returned to her spot at the island and hopped up onto the stool breezily. "Mom, you really are a compulsive liar, you know that right? Like absolutely unhinged."

Callie had broken the spell. Anger boiled over within Shauna, joined by an overwhelming, desperate urge to slap her daughter straight across the face. She wouldn't, of course, but oh, would it feel good. Callie's accusation had, however, granted her the ability to move. She took a few unsteady steps forward.

“They, uh, they didn’t know, actually. Nobody really does. Well, a few people, but when I say a few I mean a *few.* Very few.” Jackie twirled a strand of deep auburn hair around her finger nervously. “I couldn’t exactly waltz back into the world after everything that happened, but… something came up so I’m, um, here… now.”

Jackie’s calm and collected act was wearing thin, but she maintained her neutral facial expression, absentmindedly fidgeting with the tab on the can, flipping it back and forth with careful hands.

Jackie’s hands. Jackie’s hands moving. Jackie’s hands pink. Warm. There. Alive. Jackie alive. Jackie alive. *Jackie alive.*

“You’re alive,” Shauna gasped.

She whispered it, terrified that saying it too loud would make it all disappear. She turned her face up, giving Jackie the eye contact she’d been searching for. Shauna wanted to grab Jackie and throw her against a wall. She wanted to hold her tight enough that she ran a real risk of fracturing her ribs. She wanted to run gentle fingers over every inch of her face, to catalog the changes that’d happened without her there to witness them. She wanted, she wanted, she wanted.

“You’re alive and I—” Shauna took a sputtering breath, “you’re alive and you never—” she released it weakly, “you’re alive and you… you didn’t want me to know?”

There were a dozen ways that Shauna might’ve imagined herself reacting to this. Sprinting to Jackie and holding her, hoping that Jackie would embrace her back rather than shove her away. Screaming at Jackie, because how *dare* she wait this long to come back to her? Digging her fingers into Jackie’s waist and backing her against the kitchen counter, slipping her tongue into her mouth right there, in front of Jeff and Callie and the whole fucking neighborhood, for all she cared.

Never would Shauna have considered this. Never would she have thought that she’d just fucking sob. And, above all else, Shauna couldn’t have predicted that Jackie would have to be the one to bridge the gap between them.

2. to look at you

"How?" Shauna asked, more whimper than word.

Jackie held the eye contact she'd fought for as she walked straight toward Shauna. Shauna was terrified, both of breaking and maintaining it, but she steeled herself, staring back into the hazel eyes she'd once known so well. She searched for the barely perceptible dots of brown in them. *Iris freckles,* Shauna had learned one day in biology class, glancing at Jackie and smiling when their teacher briefly mentioned them. Jackie had pretended she hated those little things about herself. *Imperfections,* she'd called them, waiting for Shauna to dutifully defend the constellation of moles on her back or the birthmark above her knee that looked like a broken heart or the flecks of bright brown in her eyes.

Jackie was there, in Shauna's fucking kitchen. She was alive. And she wasn't screaming at Shauna or blaming her for her death or, apparently, not death? Shauna didn't know. She still wasn't convinced that this Jackie Taylor, aged and seemingly visible to everyone in the room, wasn't a hallucination or a complete mental break or… fucking magic, but even if she wasn't real, even if this was all in Shauna's head, even if she'd lost her mind, Shauna wanted this.

However Jackie decided to react to her, she would take it. She imagined Jackie closing her pretty hands around her throat, Jackie's nails digging into her flesh, squeezing hard. That would be okay, Shauna thought, because at least Jackie would be touching her. But Shauna knew that Jackie would never dream of hurting her like that. That was part of what made them so different.

Her headache, stubborn and brutal, vyed for her attention again. The thudding made her ears feel full, matched by an uncomfortable pressure building in her sinuses. Worse than that, so much worse than that, was the fact that this Jackie— *holy shit, real, tangible, alive Jackie* —seemed to be flitting in and out. She was fuzzy around the edges, the harsh lines of her body going soft and blurry. Shauna squeezed her eyes shut until it hurt, pain building in her temples and cheeks.

When she opened them, it was teen Jackie in front of her. She smiled wistfully, a look she often gave Shauna, but she felt as immaterial as the older Jackie had moments ago. Panic rose in Shauna's chest. She tried to swallow it down, but her throat was painful, sharp as sandpaper as she choked on her sobs. Teen Jackie wore adult Jackie's clothing. She had her scar, her hair, her tattoos.

Shauna had to get a grip, had to figure this out, because if this was real then Shauna couldn't miss it. She couldn't go away for this. She needed to stay put. She needed Jackie like she needed air, but she wasn't getting either of those right now because all she could do was blink at the mirage in front of her and sputter around coughs.

Shauna tried to be methodical, something she did to ground herself when she was having her more intense hallucinations. She worked from the top down, assessing Jackie as she went. Long, red hair parted straight down the middle—not teen Jackie. Shauna skipped her face, she wasn't ready for that yet, and let her gaze fall to Jackie's throat, watching it bob as Jackie

swallowed hard. A line of sunspots and freckles caught Shauna's eye, trailing down from Jackie's right ear. That definitely hadn't been there when they were young, had it?

No. No, Shauna would've noticed something like that. She would've run her tongue along it or trailed kisses across it and she wouldn't have forgotten that. She didn't *forget* when it came to Jackie.

She followed the line down to Jackie's chest, studying the scar she'd noticed earlier. It was long and jagged, maybe six inches from one end to the other. Fully healed, but a bright, angry red. Jackie breathed rapidly, her chest much fuller than young Jackie's had ever been.

Shauna let her eyes wander farther down. This Jackie wore a simple black v-neck, tucked into a pair of dark jeans. Tattoos made up of thin, black lines were scattered across her arms, but Shauna couldn't focus long enough to see what any of the individual shapes were. Her long fingers were covered in rings, mostly simple bands of varying sizes.

Shauna's entire body shuddered. This wasn't her imagination. Never in her fucking life would she imagine Jackie Taylor looking like this. She was beautiful, Shauna could've guessed that much would hold true, but she was so… different.

When Shauna decided to meet Jackie's eyes again, she found them almost immediately. Jackie stood directly in front of her, no longer hazy, no longer sporting teenage Jackie's face. She was solid and real. Shauna exhaled quickly, felt the force of the breath in her bones.

Jackie was expressionless. She closed her fingers around Shauna's biceps and searched her eyes. A fresh wave of sobs overtook Shauna as she leaned towards Jackie's touch.

Jackie's touch.

Shauna's heart found a new rhythm to contract and release to— *alive, alive, alive.*

Jackie squeezed tighter. Too tight, really. Almost certainly bruising. Shauna wouldn't have minded if Jackie's fingers slipped right through, if she opened Shauna up, got under her skin. She watched a single tear roll down Jackie's otherwise unreadable face, traced its path down her cheek until it met her jawline, until suddenly she couldn't watch any longer, because Jackie was holding her, slamming their bodies together. Shauna's arms burned at the sudden loss of Jackie's fingers. Jackie was touching her everywhere and everywhere was decidedly better, but still, she missed the bite of Jackie's nails on her skin. Shauna wanted her in both places at once.

She took it all in, savoring her—Jackie's arms wrapped around her waist, Jackie's face buried in the crook of her neck, Jackie's hair sticking to her tear-soaked face, Jackie's smell surrounding her. Sweet and sunny and deep, almost like bergamot but not quite, and *God,* how was it possible that she still smelled the same? The places she was touching Jackie—her arms around Jackie's neck, her hand gripping tight to the back of Jackie's head, her nose buried in Jackie's hair, her chest and stomach and legs and every goddamn inch of her pressing into Jackie like she couldn't get close enough, because she couldn't.

"How?" Shauna gasped over and over.

Jackie didn't answer Shauna. She just shook her head gently until Shauna stopped asking.

It wasn't a friendship hug, even if one of the friends in question had just managed to come back from the dead. It was a desperate, needy, intimate embrace. They breathed together, one inhaling as the other exhaled. Moved together, slotting their bodies closer like a single molecule of air between them was too much. Jackie's lips brushed the skin of Shauna's neck and Shauna couldn't tell whether or not it was intentional, but she pushed against her regardless, seeking more. She *needed* more. She threaded her fingers through Jackie's hair, grabbing a fistful of it, tugging it gently to keep her close. Shauna didn't want to care what they looked like. She wanted to let the embrace go on forever, would've gladly stayed and died in Jackie's arms.

But Jeff was clearing his throat.

Fuck.

Jackie jumped away, as though Jeff's presence in the room had surprised her. Even though Shauna had heard her breath catch in her throat and felt the shivers run through her body, there was no sign that Jackie had so much as shed a tear as she'd held Shauna. A beautiful smile was fixed to her face again but it was hollow, not quite reaching her eyes. The only physical evidence of their reunion was her hair—tousled, standing up in the back and clinging together in a few spots toward the front where Shauna's tears and runny nose had wet it.

Shauna tried to clear her own throat, but it turned quickly to a dry cough. In an act of kindness almost as unexpected as Jackie's sudden return from the grave, Callie appeared in front of her—glass of water in one shaking hand and dish towel in the other. Shauna took them gratefully. The gravity of the situation seemed to have hit Callie, her eyes wide and her face flushed, even if she didn't understand the specifics.

Shauna tried to dab at her face in a way that wasn't wholly undignified. She took a slow, careful sip of the water. She'd managed to stop sobbing, but if she tried to drink more she might choke or puke or otherwise find a way to embarrass herself. Her body hung precariously in the balance, one wrong move could shift her into a complete spiral. The last thing she needed was to go away.

"I, uh…" Jeff mumbled, stepping towards Jackie with one arm slightly raised, his expression horribly unsure.

Oh, dear God, no. No, Jeff. No, no, no.

"Oh! You know what, Jeff?" Jackie clasped her hands in front of her body, her arms acting as a physical barrier between them. "We *really* don't have to hug. We're, um, all good."

Her voice was raspy and, though she'd always had some grit to her voice, it was especially striking. Everything about her was especially striking, really, because she was dead and she wasn't. She was gone forever and here again. Shauna scrambled for some proof of reality, digging her nails into her palm and relishing in the sting, as Jeff released a slow breath through pursed lips.

"Alright… alright, yeah, Jackie." He stumbled over her name. "Well, I've got to say I'm glad you're, uh… alive."

Jackie laughed. A real, patented, contagious, Jackie Taylor laugh.

“Well, this is fucking insane,” she announced, a hint of beautiful laughter lingering in her tone. She swiped her fingers under her eyes, brushing away the minuscule tears shining there.

“O—kay.” Callie drew out the word. “Can someone tell me what the hell is going on? Mom, you seriously didn’t know she wasn’t dead?”

“Clearly, Callie,” Shauna snapped, anger flooding her. “Great observation.”

Jackie’s eyes flicked between Shauna and Callie, taking something in. Nausea built in Shauna’s chest and rose to her throat, bile threatening to spill over.

“I’m sorry, I’m just sort of… in shock right now, Cal,” Shauna amended.

Her brain buzzed, her thoughts swimming uncontrollably. Images of touching Jackie, mostly—taking her cheeks between her hands, tangling her fingers in her hair, gripping her ribcage so firmly she’d be forced to gasp. Images punctuated by questions—how did you survive, where the fuck have you been, how could you do this to me, will you stay with me now? But even in that swirling mess of thoughts, Shauna felt a clear sting of fear around how Jackie might perceive her less-than-perfect relationship with Callie.

“It is fucking insane,” Jeff said to Jackie, ignoring the exchange between Shauna and Callie entirely, “and I gotta say, Jax—”

Jax. Shauna might vomit after all, carefully controlled sips of water be damned.

“—I’m sort of on the edge of my seat here, waiting for you to give us some kind of… explanation.”

Jeff rubbed one hand over the back of his neck, his face twisted into the same helpless expression it had when they were kids and he was deferring to Jackie or Shauna for guidance.

“*Well,* Jeff,” Jackie said coolly, “as much as I’d love to catch up, this is sort of sensitive information. Like, need-to-know basis.”

She spoke to Jeff but her eyes sought Shauna, examining her from head to toe. Shauna pressed her hands over her stomach, holding herself together physically as though that alone could hold her together mentally.

“And you’re not really in the group of people that needs to know.” Jackie leaned back on the counter, her weight in her hands behind her, looking so fucking casual. It drove Shauna insane. Her cheeks flushed, her heart raced, her thoughts grew even messier.

Jackie Taylor was back from the dead. She’d let herself into Shauna’s home, offered no explanation for anything that’d happened between then and now, and somehow Shauna still found herself distracted by just how beautiful she was.

When Jackie finally turned toward Jeff, Shauna missed the warmth of her gaze immediately.

“I really think the best move here is for me to talk to Shauna,” Jackie said, “and let *her* decide what she wants to tell her husband.”

Oh. They were doing that now.

Jeff had almost bristled at Jackie's dig, backing down when Shauna shot him a dirty look—one she was surprised she still had access to in her haze. The mood had shifted, the initial shock abated, making way for other emotions on Jeff's part. Jackie had suggested he take Callie to his grandparents' old beach house, assuming it was still in the family. "*Better safe than sorry,*" she'd chimed, forcibly cheery. It'd been a sharp reminder of just how well she knew them both. Shauna had a feeling that had been intentional.

He'd ultimately agreed when Shauna, by some small miracle, had managed to calmly insist that it was a good idea. After some grumbling about *deserving to know what's going on in this family* Callie had shuffled off to pack.

Shauna had hesitated for half a second, wondering how she could justify this. How could Shauna know that Jackie—Jackie who had hid from her, who wouldn't tell her anything, who'd kept her in the dark, who'd let her lose her mind—had their best interests at heart? But Shauna knew, deep in her soul, in her bones, that she could trust Jackie.

She could trust Jackie.

Jackie, who was alive.

Breathing.

There.

Maybe it wasn't instinct. Maybe it was just muscle memory or a result of the deep shame and guilt that Shauna had borne every single day for decades. It didn't matter. She wouldn't do anything to risk this. Jackie had come to her. *Finally.* She'd come to the house that Shauna shared with her ex-boyfriend and their daughter. And, instead of being cold or cruel like Shauna almost certainly would've been, Jackie had befriended her daughter. Comforted her. Hugged Shauna. Hell, held her. Been mostly civil to Jeff.

This was a goddamn, verifiable miracle in more ways than one. And, at the core of it all, Shauna simply didn't care about anything more than the prospect of being with Jackie. She'd gladly let her husband and her daughter walk off into what might be a trap, if it meant that she could exist in Jackie's presence just a little longer.

A few hours prior, Shauna and Jeff had been discussing how likely she was to get away with murder. Now, she was rummaging through her closet for clothes that didn't scream *mom* and throwing them into a duffel bag, packing to go away with Jackie. She still needed to deal with the Adam of it all, more pissed at herself than ever for allowing it to become such an issue, but it could wait. Everything else could wait.

"Hey," Jeff said.

He hovered in the doorway, his things already packed, looking expectantly at Shauna. She was hunched over the bed rolling up a pair of jeans so that they would fit in her overstuffed bag. She paused to glance up at him, her eyebrows raised and her lips pursed, daring him to say something stupid. He took the heavy-handed hint that she was waiting for him to continue.

"You look like you're packing for a… a long trip there, babe."

He leaned against the wall, rubbing his hand on his pants like he was trying to wipe something off.

Shauna perched herself on the edge of the bed. She couldn't sink her weight down. She hovered, energy coursing through her, every muscle tense. She hadn't wanted to walk away from Jackie. Putting even one room between them was killing her. Nothing made any fucking sense and all Shauna wanted to do was touch her, but she knew she couldn't push it. She wouldn't do a damn thing to risk this. So, when Jackie had told her to go pack, she'd headed for their bedroom obediently, her heart hammering against her ribs.

"Well, yeah," Shauna said. "I don't exactly know what I'm getting into here and I'd rather be prepared than… not."

"I'm just feeling a little… in the dark here." Jeff fully broached the threshold into their room. Shauna held her breath. "I—I don't want to lose you."

He swallowed hard. Shauna's headache flared as he joined her on the edge of the bed, jostling her.

"You're not… *losing* anything, okay? We don't know what's going on right now, but it's probably no more dangerous than everything else I've dealt with."

Jeff reached for her hand and she twitched. She jumped to her feet immediately, in a feeble attempt to pass the flinch off as bad timing. She knew all hell could break loose over that one little move and she didn't have time for that, couldn't sit and watch him throw a tantrum while Jackie was waiting in the other room.

Jackie there, in her house, waiting for her. Shauna turned the words over in her mind—dissecting them, repeating them, building them into something real instead of a fantasy.

Shauna noticed him again, staring at her earnestly.

"Let's just… not get too dramatic about this," she said, "until we have a reason to."

"You know that's not what I mean." Jeff pinched the bridge of his nose and bent forward, his elbows balanced on his knees.

"Well, I don't know *what* you mean then," Shauna quickly chose anger, settling into it comfortably, "because now it sounds like you aren't actually worried about *me* and I'm not sure what the hell you're talking about if that's the case."

She knew it wasn't fair. It wasn't directed where she wanted to direct it. Shauna wanted to hold Jackie, tell her that she loved her, pin her against a wall and kiss her, get on her fucking knees and beg for her forgiveness, touch every inch of her.

But she also wanted to shake her. She wanted to dig her fingers into Jackie's shoulders and squeeze, she wanted to demand answers, and a quiet, vengeful part of her wanted to hurt Jackie back. But she couldn't risk upsetting Jackie right now. She didn't want to break this small, fragile thing. This fucking gift. She would tear down just about anything else in her life for a chance at keeping Jackie. And that had to be the exact destruction that Jeff was afraid of.

Shauna couldn't yell at Jackie, so Shauna yelled at Jeff.

“Everything okay in here?” Jackie appeared in the doorway, one hand on either side of the frame, looking like a vision.

She worried her lip, her eyes even wider than usual. Shauna opened her mouth to respond, but Callie beat her to the punch.

“They do that!” she called from the living room, her tone impressively bored.

Jesus fucking Christ, Callie.

Shauna wanted them out, needed her *loving family* to be far away from her, sooner rather than later.

“Everything is just fine,” Shauna croaked, smiling weakly. ‘You guys should get going,’ she added, fixing Jeff with the look she gave him when she wasn’t to be argued with. “It’s late already. Long drive.”

“Sure, Shauna, we’ll do that.” He scoffed and shook his head, rising to his feet. “Callie, let’s move!”

His tone changed on a dime when he addressed their daughter, as if Callie was thirteen again and he was taking her to basketball practice, rather than escorting her to a half-assed excuse for a safe house on the instruction of his presumed-dead ex-girlfriend.

He paused before exiting the room, wrapping Shauna in a brief hug and pressing a kiss to her forehead. Shauna didn’t move, just kept her arms at her sides and felt a white-hot sting of guilt in her stomach. Jackie stepped out of his way, one hand still fixed on the door frame so that he had to squeeze past her.

“Going to load the car,” he said over his shoulder, his and Callie’s bags in tow. “Meet me outside, Cal.”

The front door slammed shut behind him. Shauna followed suit, brushing lightly against Jackie as she did, shivers rolling through her body.

“Do you have everything you need?” she asked Callie.

She almost added *sweetie* at the end, but she knew that was too heavy-handed. It likely would’ve earned her a snide remark that Jackie didn’t need to witness.

“Yeah, I think so,” Callie said. “Mom, be like, safe, or whatever, okay?”

Shame slammed through Shauna, physical and solid, like running into a wall. Shame for her lack of regard for Callie, for wanting to hit her earlier, for still wanting her gone.

“I will, Cal,” Shauna promised.

Callie lunged at her, flinging her arms around her neck. Shauna managed to hug her daughter back, unlike her husband. She felt more fondness toward Callie in that moment than she had in months, maybe years. Both of them were inclined to emotional whiplash, love and hate lingering in every interaction, competing for the spotlight. Callie pulled away and threw her backpack over one shoulder, heading for the door.

“You too,” Callie added as she passed Jackie, giving her a brief, one-armed hug.

Jackie smiled gently and leaned into it. Warm, kind, immediately lovable Jackie. Jackie there, Jackie alive, Jackie hugging her daughter.

The car started almost immediately after Callie let the door swing shut behind her, which meant that Shauna was alone with Jackie, at last.

She waited for the other shoe to drop, afraid to say anything that might scare Jackie off, now that they had privacy. She toyed absently with the fringe of the blanket strewn across the back of the couch as she snuck shy glances at Jackie, who was still staring at the front door.

Jackie shook her head abruptly, as though snapping out of a trance. “Where do you keep the Motrin?”

It was the weirdest thing, so far from the grand statement of anger or explanation of circumstances that Shauna had expected.

“In—” Shauna cleared her throat. “In the kitchen. Here… I’ll get it for you.”

Shauna felt Jackie’s eyes on her as she led her to the kitchen. Her entire body flushed beneath the weight of it. When she handed Jackie the bottle, the brush of Jackie’s pinky against her thumb was enough to bring more tears to her eyes. She watched as Jackie filled the same glass that Callie had brought her with fresh water, in awe over her every movement —the way her fingers closed around it, the flick of her wrist as she switched the tap on, the tilt of her head as she stretched her neck to the side. Jackie opened the bottle and shook two pills into her hand, thrusting them at Shauna.

When Shauna didn’t move right away, Jackie prompted her with a little nod. Shauna still didn’t budge, transfixed by her.

“Here,” Jackie said. “Take them.”

Shauna did as she was told, grabbing the pills and popping them into her mouth before downing the entire glass of water. She took a shaky breath, then tested her ability to speak in a way she hadn’t yet dared.

“Thanks, but… what’s that for? You… going to beat me up later and want me to be premedicated or something?”

A brief flash of surprise crossed Jackie’s features, transitioning just as quickly to a small, sheepish smirk. Jackie bit back a laugh and Shauna’s heart soared. Shauna joking with Jackie. Shauna making Jackie smile. *Shauna and Jackie.* An interaction that used to be so small, so insignificant, suddenly meant everything to her, easily eclipsing every other good thing that had happened to her in the years that had passed since the last time they’d laughed together.

“No.” Jackie’s smile stretched wider as she spoke. “Not that I haven’t considered it, trust me. But… no. *You* have a headache.”

Shauna’s jaw slackened.

“I could just… tell you had one and you never take meds when you should. You always let it go on and on and…” Jackie trailed off, twisting one of her rings back and forth.

“Thank you,” Shauna’s voice broke. “You’re…” she cleared her throat, “you’re right. I have a massive headache.”

The burner phone rang from Shauna's pocket. She pulled it out quickly, Misty's name lighting up the small screen.

"And there it is now," she muttered under her breath.

Shauna flashed the phone at Jackie, who gripped her wrist suddenly.

"Don't answer."

Shauna's skin tingled where Jackie's fingers grazed it. She obeyed, dropping the phone on the counter. Jackie released her wrist. More tears pricked behind Shauna's eyes at the loss of contact.

"Why not?" Shauna said.

Jackie sighed, one hand on her hip, the other pressed to her temple. A full ten seconds passed in silence. Shauna waited her out, watching her think, watching her breathe, watching her exist was enough. Jackie. Jackie there, Jackie talking, Jackie alive.

"Because you just… you just—" Jackie rubbed roughly at her face, her cheeks flushing a pretty pink. "God, I hadn't thought this far ahead. There's a lot of shit I need to tell you, just… not this second. I can't explain right this second. And I'm sure you're sick of people saying that to you right now, but I promise I *am* going to tell you."

Jackie's speech was a familiar pattern, rambling in a way that somehow didn't feel aimless, making pledges and offering sympathy. It lulled Shauna closer to acceptance. She sank into it, warmth flooding her from head to toe.

"But?" Shauna croaked, her throat sore and her arms wrapped around her stomach. She didn't know how else to stop herself from reaching for her, dragging her close, sinking her fingers into her skin. Warm. Alive.

"But," Jackie said, "I need you to trust me right now. Not Misty Quigley. Not anybody else. At least… not until we know more."

"I—Jax." Shauna held her breath after letting the nickname slip, praying it wouldn't push Jackie over the edge, praying it wasn't a fatal blow. Jackie gave no reaction. "I'm just… I mean… we haven't… you've been…"

Good one, Shauna.

"Right," Jackie chimed, her old team captain's voice in full effect. Shauna's heart fluttered. 'Well, here's the abridged version, because it's all we've got time for. I want us to go. Now. *Just* us. Not Misty. And,' Jackie whispered, leaning close to Shauna, her lips hovering near her ear, "I can't tell you why until we're out of this fucking house. Misty's been bugging people."

Jackie's breath against Shauna's cheek sent a chill down her spine. This had to be an elaborate dream. There was no way. There was no way this was… there was no way.

"So, can we please just go?" Jackie whined.

That voice. The one that drove Shauna crazy, enthralled and annoyed and captivated and infuriated her. *Jackie.* Dream or not, this was *Jackie.*

“Fuck it,” Shauna said. “Yeah, we can go. Just us.”

Shauna sat in the passenger seat of Jackie’s Mercedes, forcing herself to stare out the window. Jeff, clearly out of spite, had taken her piece of shit car rather than his own. She was grateful for that little jab. She and Jackie hadn’t needed to pretend to decide whose car to take. One less thing for Shauna to be embarrassed about. Shauna tried to avoid staring at Jackie. She didn’t want to spook her, worried Jackie would run like a startled deer at the slightest indiscretion.

“So…” Jackie’s voice filled the air and Shauna lost all of her hard-won self control.

She jerked her head toward the sound so quickly her neck twinged. Jackie was staring straight ahead, fiddling blindly with the heat.

“You—you’re quiet,” Jackie said. ‘I thought you’d be, like, grilling me or something. It’s starting to creep me out a little, honestly. I’ve thought about how you’d react, oh, maybe a million times?’ Jackie puffed a little air out, blowing stray hairs off of her face. “But I never really imagined you’d let me do all the talking.”

“I’m just…” Shauna stared at her unabashedly now that she’d been given an excuse, “busy looking at you, I guess.”

Wrong thing, Shauna. Wrong fucking thing to say.

Shauna chewed on her lip. She felt stupid, with Jackie in front of her. Mind blank, unable to form words, unable to do anything but stare.

“Looking at me?” Jackie asked. “You’re busy looking at me?”

She laughed, another true Jackie Taylor laugh, with her head thrown back. Shauna watched in wonder until she remembered that it was her turn to speak.

“I know… I know I did such—” Shauna sobbed, clutching her chest with one trembling hand, “—terrible things to you. That I’m—no matter what this is, how this happened, I’m… I’m mostly the one who… who fucked us up.”

“Mostly?” Jackie scoffed.

“I know. I *know,* okay? Trust me. I’ve done fucked up shit here but you—you let me think you were *dead,”* Shauna cried. “You let me *mourn* you and miss you for fucking decades. I’m still not even sure you’re re—”

Jackie frowned at Shauna and she cut herself off.

“—anyway, it… it doesn’t matter now. Now you’re here and I just want to look at you for a while. And I feel like maybe I’ve earned that much.”

Shauna gulped in air, sharp and painful. Her whole chest burned. She had to keep going, she had to push through.

“I have questions. A ton of them. I’m… I have no fucking clue what’s going on right now. It doesn’t feel real. But… I know you probably have questions,” Shauna choked, her voice

breaking. “And I know you’re probably fucking pissed at me or you wouldn’t have… have *hidden* from me like this.”

Shauna pushed harder against her chest, her fingers digging in uncomfortably.

“So yeah, I—I’m quiet. I don’t—” she took a shuddering breath. “I don’t want to fight with you, Jackie, and we have every reason to. So, I just… I just want to look at you. Please.”

“Hmm,” Jackie hummed. “I think we can arrange that.”

She glanced over at Shauna, a small, shy smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. Shauna’s heart melted. She stared at Jackie in silence—at Jackie’s eyelashes brushing the very tops of her cheeks as she blinked, at her fingers wrapped tight around the steering wheel, at her bottom lip pulled between her teeth—until Jackie broke it.

“So, how’s the looking going?” Jackie winked.

“Oh my god,” Shauna scoffed, rolling her eyes. “You look different.”

“Different?” Jackie said. “Huh, well you look like his little Suzy Homemaker.” She rode the line between biting and teasing in the way she’d always done best.

“I am,” Shauna mumbled, picking at her cuticles absentmindedly.

“Bullshit,” Jackie said. “Like hell you are.”

Blood began to pool on Shauna’s ring finger. She closed her hands into fists on her lap instead. She tried again.

“You look incredible. You look like… like I just want to fucking grab you.” *Oh, Jesus fucking Christ.* ‘Like you’re here and alive and beautiful.’ Shauna felt the blush creep up her neck. “And honestly I just… I want to be touching you. But I don’t—if you shove me away it’ll… just, it’ll… I don’t want that.”

There was something deeply sad behind Jackie’s eyes when she met Shauna’s. And maybe this wasn’t real. Maybe it was all a dream. Shauna knew that she needed to prepare herself for that possibility, but she dug herself deeper, desperate to soothe the sting for Jackie, real or fake.

“It would be fair, though. Of you to shove me away, I mean. I know that. So I’m… looking.”

Shauna’s cheeks burned hot with embarrassment. She could feel them shifting redder with every word. Tears rushed down them, coating her lips with salt.

“Is it possible—” Jackie stretched a hand out toward Shauna, wiggling her fingers until Shauna quickly wiped the blood off of her nails and interlaced their hands. “—to *look* like someone wants to grab you?” Jackie brought their hands down, resting their forearms on the console between them, and rubbed a thumb over Shauna’s skin slowly. “Because, for such a writer, I gotta say that was a pretty weak line.”

“Take what you can get.” Shauna shrugged. ‘Three hours ago I thought you were d-dead,’ she tried to joke, ending up crying harder. “I didn’t exactly have a lot of time to prepare something better.”

They were silent for a few minutes, Shauna relishing in Jackie's grip, until Jackie shattered it.

"I was pissed, Shauna," she whispered. "Like, truly furious."

Shauna's heart sank. She made to pull her hand away from Jackie's, but Jackie squeezed tighter, refusing to let go.

"But I don't hate you. I've never hated you. I'm sort of… over it right now. The anger. It isn't *gone* gone. We have… issues. Like, major shit to work out."

We have major shit to work out, she'd said. As in, there was a *we*. There was a *Jackie and Shauna*. A relationship to repair. Shauna choked on her breath.

Jackie was still talking.

"To be honest, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to ignore it but," Jackie glanced at Shauna, "I don't want to fight, either. Not right now. I missed you. So fucking much."

Shauna shoved hard against the anger that rose in her chest. If Jackie had missed her, how could she do this to her? Let her suffer without her for so long? None of it made sense, and Jackie had offered absolutely no explanation.

"Honestly…" Jackie said, "I want to look at you and grab you, too."

Jackie's use of Shauna's own inelegant wording was the final blow to the anger inside her. It slipped away, defeated, and she squeezed Jackie's hand.

"And," Jackie took a shaky breath, "you're still just as gorgeous as you always were. I mean it."

Jackie still had this effect on her. This intense, suffocating ability to overwhelm her with just a few words. Shauna felt warm all over, embarrassed and powerful and frustrated. Everything all at once, heat lancing through her.

"So, did you want to tell me why we're going to the city?" Shauna asked. "And why we're ditching Quigley? Not that I'm really complaining."

"We're going to the city because I live there and I need to pack my shit, too."

Shauna wasn't sure where she'd thought Jackie lived. She wasn't sure she'd even considered it, but her living right there? Fucking right next door? It made Shauna feel even crazier than usual.

"And," Jackie continued, "we're ditching Quigley because I don't know who did it but…" she bit her lip so hard Shauna worried she might draw blood. Shauna drew shapes on the back of her hand with her thumb. "But someone sold your journals. The ones from… from out there."

"Sold… sold them?" Shauna croaked out.

"But, you don't have to worry that much, okay? I mean, it is bad and it is worrisome and we don't know who all has seen them but… but, okay, um…" Jackie faltered.

Shauna watched her fingers grip the steering wheel harder—dark gray nail polish, stacks of delicate rings, suns spots and dotted freckles.

"Lottie bought them, so like, nobody trying to get a scoop or something ended up with them, at least."

"Lottie? I—she… she bought them?" Shauna grew louder with each word. "And you know this *how?* I mean, does Lottie… does she know you're not… you—you told *Lottie?"*

"She's—well… she's, uh, sort of the whole reason I'm even alive," Jackie said carefully.

Shauna ripped her hand out of Jackie's successfully this time.

"What the fuck does that mean, Jackie?" Shauna screeched.

Jackie flinched.

Fuck.

"Don't fucking *yell* at me, Shipman!"

A beat of silence.

Shipman.

Shauna's heart shattered.

"Shit," Jackie said, all breath and regret. "I mean… I guess I mean Sadecki."

"I don't… I don't want to do that now." Shauna exhaled slowly. "I… I'm sorry."

Tears streamed down both of their cheeks, Jackie's mascara smearing at the corners of her eyes.

"I'm so fucking sorry," Shauna sobbed, burying her face in her hands. *Please believe me,* she added in her head. *Please, Jax, please, please, please.* 'I didn't mean to yell.' Shauna wiped her eyes with trembling fingers. "I shouldn't have. I—but… Lottie? How?"

"I cannot handle telling you this fucking story right now!"

For the first time that evening, Jackie was truly crying. Fat tears rolled down her cheeks, falling onto her lap. Her arms were extended in front of her, her hands gripping the steering wheel so hard her fingers were cast in white. Her shoulders shook gently as she choked back sobs. Her whole body was tense with effort. Shauna cried harder.

"I'm not ready yet," Jackie whimpered, her tone softening. "We're not there yet."

"Okay," Shauna soothed. "Okay, Jackie, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

She placed a tentative hand near Jackie's shoulder, barely brushing against it. When Jackie didn't pull away, Shauna trailed her fingers in circles on her upper back in a desperate attempt to comfort her. Jackie regained her composure far quicker than Shauna could ever hope to, rubbing at her face roughly with one hand. She was still crying, but her body wasn't in it any longer. It was just tears falling faster than she could bat them away.

Without thinking—transfixed by Jackie's beautiful fucking face, possessed by the need to touch her, to make this better somehow—Shauna leaned toward her, wiping the tears away for

her. Jackie gasped when Shauna made contact with her skin. Shauna tensed, frozen, until Jackie sniffled.

"Thanks," Jackie mumbled under her breath.

Shauna nodded and forced herself to clasp her hands in her lap. She couldn't push it, couldn't break this.

"So, Lot— *she,"* Shauna corrected herself, avoiding Lottie's name for fear of upsetting Jackie further, "bought them? Like, what… for her own gain, somehow? Or do you mean to —to help us?"

"As far as I know, it was to help us." Jackie's voice cracked on us, as though she wasn't quite sure about that word. "I know you two have your… issues, but she's the one I trust the most in this mess."

Shauna opened her mouth, but Jackie kept going.

"And I'll tell you *why* later, I promise. I'll tell you everything if you let me, but it has to be at my pace."

"Okay," Shauna whispered, trying to convey just how much she meant it. (The fact that she wasn't sure she truly did felt too far from the point to matter.)

Jackie nodded. "But, if I'm being honest, I don't know—can't know, not for certain—who's on what side here. Misty's… well, Misty. She was recording Nat's motel room. There was this camera hidden on the fucking nightstand. I showed up to warn Nat, because Lottie was convinced she was in danger."

Shauna sat up straighter. This time, when Jackie reached for her, she complied instantly, hand finding hers and squeezing firmly.

"Before you ask, no, I don't know whether she was convinced by something like… *conventional* or not."

Shauna might've bristled at that another time. She was constantly trying to distance herself from all the… shit that Lottie had dragged them into. But she was holding Jackie's hand in her own, listening to her speak, watching her chest rise and fall with even breaths, so Shauna didn't much care whether Lottie had seen something through a goddamn crystal ball. Shauna didn't much care about anything aside from the impossibly soft, shockingly warm skin beneath her fingers.

"But she was convinced," Jackie sighed. "She's had a… rough go of it. I know everyone has but she—it's harder for her. To do things like that. So, I went. I figured it was a matter of time before people found out about… about *me*, anyway."

"You thought—why?" Shauna sputtered.

"I got a stupid postcard, too." Jackie shrugged. "First time in years I've felt like someone really has me cornered."

Shauna wanted to change course, to ask Jackie what they fuck that meant. Where she'd been. Why she'd been there. She very much didn't want to talk about Natalie right now. As fucked as it was, she didn't care about *anyone* else right now.

“By the time I got there, Nat was already gone. Keys on the table. Purse and phone, too. And…” Jackie chewed her lip again. “There was a loaded rifle on the ground. Safety off. One bullet.”

Shauna sucked in a breath. She nodded slowly, desperate for Jackie to finish this.

“The room phone rang. I didn’t know what else to do and—maybe it was dumb, but I thought if there was a chance I could help her—I picked it up,” Jackie explained, her nails scratching lightly at Shauna’s hand. “But it was Misty fucking Quigley. She sounded… honestly, a little hysterical?”

It couldn’t have been long after the moment Jackie was describing that Misty had called Shauna, and she hadn’t sounded anywhere near hysterical then. Shauna grimaced, weary of whatever Misty was playing at.

“It was so… not her. I know I haven’t talked to her in a long time. I just can’t really imagine she’s changed all that much, so it was… *weird.”*

Jackie sounded more than weirded out. She sounded afraid. Shauna wanted to wrap her arms around her and make sweeping promises that she couldn’t keep until the fear eased out of her.

“I got her to calm down, but she’d said my name. Before I even said *hello*, she said my name. I knew something was really fucking wrong then.” Jackie’s pretty eyes were wide, her bottom lip quivering. “She said Nat was about to kill herself. But some fucking… masked weirdos came into the room and… and *took* her. Just hauled her away.”

Shauna wiped at Jackie’s cheek again, collecting her tears on her fingertips and rubbing them against the pad of her thumb until the saltwater sank into her skin.

“Jesus, Jax.”

“Yeah.” Jackie’s breath was ragged. “At the end of the call, Misty told me she was going to… to tell you about me and to, like, pick you up and have you help her find Nat. She said I could come if I wanted and she… she gave me your address.”

Shauna swallowed hard.

“When I asked her how she knew all of this, she stopped sounding sad or… or panicked or whatever. Like, totally flipped a switch and told me about the hidden camera, like it was the simplest thing on the planet.”

Shauna’s head spun. She couldn’t make sense of any of it. Nat suicidal, Nat kidnapped, Misty recording her, Misty knowing Jackie was alive, Jackie alive. No matter how hard she tried to think about anything else, it kept circling back to that: *Jackie alive.*

“So,” Jackie cleared her throat, “here’s what I know. I know that Lottie had to buy your journals from someone for a lot of money. I know that Nat is fucking missing. I know that Misty is, well, being Misty.”

Shauna nodded, dazed.

“And… please don’t get mad… I know that Jeff blackmailed you guys,” Jackie’s voice was soft and pleading, except for when she spat Jeff’s name out like something sour.

“How did—” Shauna’s vision blurred around the edges. She clung to Jackie’s hand tighter. “How did you know that?”

“I—wait, you *knew?*” Jackie’s jaw hung open, her lips parted in shock.

“I figured it out after,” Shauna said curtly, trying to make it clear that she didn’t want to say one more word about her idiot husband’s transgressions.

Jackie went with it, mercifully.

“I… *wow*, okay. Well, Lottie found out. Your journals, they… apparently they came with a note. She showed me and I… I recognized the handwriting. Shauna, it had, like, his *notes* for blackmailing you guys.” Jackie’s brow furrowed, her fury evident in her tone. “A draft of the text, who to send it to, when to schedule the drop. Everything. Even a little fucking checkmark next to the drop, like, *okay phew, blackmailing my… my wife and her friends worked like a charm, we can cross that one off the to do list.”*

Jackie waited for a reaction. Shauna just dragged her thumb across the back of her hand.

“I don’t know for sure why the stupid fucking to do list was with the journals,” Jackie continued, “but it’s… it’s a little suspicious.”

It was more than a little, but… he wouldn’t, would he? Not the man who had been ready to go to prison for Shauna?

“It is,” Shauna said. “Is that why you sent them away?”

“Well, partly, yeah. I mean, I do think we’re all in danger and I would assume that includes your… family.” Jackie’s eyes shone hazy with tears in the low light. “And I do think they’re better off away from your house right now, especially when Misty’s giving the address out like candy. But… I don’t trust anyone right now, really. And that sure as hell includes Jeff.”

“But… you trust me?” Shauna chanced, her stomach tangled in knots.

“I… trust that you have no earthly fucking reason to sell those journals,” Jackie said. “That much is… well, it’s concrete. And I don’t have a lot of concrete to work with right now.”

Shauna hummed her acknowledgement.

Of course Jackie didn’t trust her. Why the hell would she? All Shauna had done to her was lie. But still it stung, needling at her.

“D-did you read them?” Shauna asked. “You saw the note, so… did you read the journals?”

“No,” Jackie answered softly. “No, I learned my lesson on that one.”

Shauna let the comment lie. “So,” she said, after allowing a silent minute to pass between them, “everybody’s packing, but I’m not sure I know where we’re actually going. Care to enlighten me?”

Jackie laughed a little. “You know what, I *totally* wish I could. But I don’t really have a grand plan, at least not beyond getting-the-fuck-out-of-dodge and, by the looks of it, that’s the way everybody is feeling right now.”

Shauna nodded, rubbing her thumb in careful circles across Jackie's knuckles.

"Nat got… she got *taken* out of her fucking motel room. I just think we ought to get away from where we're expected to be. I want to find Nat, but it might take some time and I think we're going to have to decide to trust someone in order to do it. But we can't help her if *we* get snatched, too. So," she shrugged, "just… away."

Jackie tried to motion with the hand still in Shauna's, but Shauna wasn't ready to let go.

Not yet.

Jackie's apartment was simple. The walls were white, the furniture plain, the décor muted and sparse. Shauna had expected bright colors, cozy finishings, and, well, personality. There were no pictures anywhere, just the occasional piece of generic art. Jackie had immediately gone to the back of the apartment to pack, assuring Shauna she'd be right back.

She'll be right back, Shauna repeated to herself. *Jackie will be right back. She can walk ten feet away from you. She's real. She isn't disappearing. She'll be right back.*

It took Jackie five minutes to return—Shauna kept track—with a sleek, new-looking suitcase in tow. It was black, like everything else, and the type that would be a nightmare to find among all the others just like it at a baggage claim. Shauna wondered, suddenly, if Jackie even got on planes. It felt strange, not knowing that about her. It stood out among all the other strange bits and pieces of this and struck Shauna.

"I haven't lived here long. I move a lot," Jackie explained, as if reading Shauna's mind. 'And I like,' she gestured at the bag, "to sort of… blend in a lot of the time."

That hurt Shauna more than Jackie's quiet little sobs had. It was clear to her that Jackie had been forced to shrink herself, to make herself small and ordinary, just to get by. She'd been this bright, colorful person—her dumb, hot, awesome self—and now she was stuck in this completely different life.

"Always New York?" Shauna said. She shot for casual but fell incredibly short, landing somewhere near dismay.

"Huh?" Jackie murmured. She sounded far away, as she shuffled through a stack of papers on the kitchen counter. "Oh, no. I mean, the past few years, yeah. But not always. I've lived all over."

She grabbed a manilla envelope and shoved it in her purse, then ripped a piece of paper off of a notepad and started scribbling quickly, her purse already slung over her shoulder.

"Are you… are you leaving somebody a note?"

A pang of jealousy shot through Shauna as she spoke. She closed her eyes to let it pass, but all she accomplished was seeing it in her mind's eye. Someone else existing in the glow of Jackie Taylor's orbit. Someone living with her. Someone coming home to her and watching stupid reality TV with her and getting in bed with her every fucking night. Someone getting to love Jackie Taylor, while Shauna—

God, like Shauna had any fucking right.

"Uh… yeah, my—" Jackie started, cutting herself off at the sound of elevator doors opening down the hall. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

She shoved the unfinished note in her bag and grabbed Shauna. The fear in her eyes meant that Shauna probably shouldn't be basking in the sudden presence of Jackie's hands on her shoulders—leaning forward, chasing the feeling further—but she couldn't help herself. It was Jackie. Jackie touching her. Jackie alive.

"Do *not* call me Jackie," Jackie demanded, her voice low.

"Great, what the fuck do I call you?" Shauna whispered.

There were footsteps now, steadily approaching them.

"Lucy, I'm Lucy!"

The footsteps stopped outside the door.

"And we," Jackie gestured between them, "are coworkers on a deadline!"

Someone rummaged through a bag.

"And what do we do for work, *Lucy?"*

Keys jangled.

"I'm a ghostwriter," Jackie hissed. "And you can give me shit about that later."

Shauna didn't have much time to think about what it meant that Jackie was a professional writer, because the keys had slotted into the door. Jackie shoved Shauna into a chair at the dining room table, just as the lock clicked open. Her ass hit the seat— *ouch* —and Jackie managed to leap into the kitchen, grabbing a glass out of the cabinet just before the door swung open.

In walked a woman. A *beautiful* woman. Tall, brunette, a bit younger than them—Shauna guessed in her mid-thirties. She wore pink scrubs, her dark hair pulled back in a sleek ponytail.

Jackie was filling a glass under the tap, looking so fucking natural. It was eerie how quickly she'd moved across the room, changing her entire demeanor on a dime.

"Baby?" the woman asked, still staring down at a stack of mail in her hands. "You home?"

"Hi, honey," Jackie called brightly. "We have some company. I meant to text, but totally spaced it."

Baby. Honey. Shauna swallowed down the bile rising in her throat, her head spinning, her stomach clenching.

Jackie was with—clearly actually in a *relationship* with—a woman. That was so much worse than anything Shauna had expected. She had a—what, a girlfriend? Wife? Shauna scanned their left hands. No wedding bands, thank God. Her ears rang. She didn't know what she'd expected. She had no reason not to think that Jackie was interested in women. Truthfully, she had some pretty compelling evidence that she was. She and Jackie had crossed

into that territory before, and hadn't she always hoped it wasn't just some sort of experiment? But now that she had proof that it wasn't, she felt so much worse. This woman coming home to Jackie. Spending her days with her. Calling her baby.

Shauna forced a smile onto her face.

"Oh, gosh! Sorry, I was totally distracted." The woman laughed, a light, airy thing.

When Jackie stepped towards her, the woman pressed a kiss to her cheek, smiling warmly. Something twisted inside of Shauna. She shoved it down. Hard. The woman dropped her things on the table and approached Shauna, her arm outstretched.

"I'm Rachel, nice to meet you…"

Shauna stood, taking her hand and shaking a few times, her body on autopilot as she scrutinized every inch of Rachel's face.

"Sally," Shauna answered. Her cheeks felt tight, overstretched, even though the smile she offered Rachel in return was miniscule. "Nice to meet you, too."

Jackie tilted her head at Shauna, blinking a few times. Rachel snaked an arm around Jackie's waist, drawing Jackie's attention back to her.

"Let me guess," Rachel said breezily. "Work?"

Jackie looked up at her sweetly. Shauna's gut twisted.

"Why, how *ever* did you guess?" Jackie sighed. She rolled her eyes showily. "This deadline has us absolutely screwed, Rach. And the worst part is—I was actually just about to call you, I didn't expect you home from work this early—we have to go meet with the author again."

The lies rolled off of Jackie's tongue—sweet words and innocent eyes. Shauna wondered if her own lies were half this convincing or if the people she lied to simply didn't care very much.

Rachel's disappointment was clear in her pursed lips.

"Why am I not surprised?" She peeled her hands off of Jackie's waist and placed them on the counter behind her.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. I *really* am," Jackie assured her, a hand on her shoulder, batting up through long lashes. Shauna wanted to scream. 'It's the account in Montreal though. Not too far.' Jackie gave Rachel's shoulder a little shake. "But we really *do* have to get going, like… shit, what time is the flight again, Sally?"

"Oh!" Shauna jumped, peeling her eyes off of Jackie and Rachel long enough to check her phone for the time. "Boarding is at 12:35, so we don't have very long. We were just about to walk out the door, actually." She directed her words at Rachel, trying to sound apologetic.

Bye, bitch.

"Sally dropped her stuff in my car on the way up. We were trying to get a little work done before we had to head to the airport." Jackie backed away from Rachel, stacking her purse on

top of her suitcase. “I’m just going to do long term parking, because the client is paying for it and I would *love* to up their bill right about now!”

Shauna stood, skirting towards the door. She needed air, and fast. The stark, white walls were closing in on her.

Rachel smiled again, though it looked less genuine than it had before.

“Okay, I hope you guys have a good flight. Luce—” Rachel wrapped her arms around Jackie and pulled her in for a kiss, “—text me when you land, okay? I’ll probably still be up. You know I’m used to night shift right now.”

It wasn’t a particularly long kiss. It wasn’t a particularly passionate kiss. But it was a loving kiss. A comfortable kiss. A kiss that made Shauna want to punch something.

“I will.” Jackie flashed her a real grin. “I promise.”

The elevator creaked down slowly. Jackie lived on the ninth floor and they’d parked on the second level underground. They let the first few floors pass in silence, standing shoulder to shoulder and leaning against the mirrored silver wall.

Jackie was the first to speak.

“You don’t get to say shit to me.”

“I wasn’t saying anything,” Shauna said.

About what shit, she wondered, did Jackie mean? The career choice or the fucking girlfriend?

They took a few more floors in silence.

“You picked a fake name,” Jackie chuckled. “You know, you didn’t have to do that.”

“It felt right.” Shauna shrugged, finally looking over at her.

Jackie was staring at her, grinning. Shauna smiled back, unable to stop herself from noticing that this smile was just a little bigger, a little brighter, than the one that Jackie had given Rachel.

The doors slid open and they stepped out.

“Hey, *Sally?”* Jackie smirked, rolling her suitcase beside her.

“Yes, *Lucy?”*

Jackie tossed her keys to Shauna, who managed to snag them out of the air.

“I really do hate driving.”

3. holding your breath

1995

"Can't you just stay?" Jackie whined.

Shauna sighed. It was nearly eleven, already far later than she'd intended to be out on a school night.

"It's late." Shauna's voice was muffled, but she knew that Jackie could hear her from the way she tensed beneath her. "I should already be home."

Jackie was holding Shauna, which meant that Shauna's resolve began to wear thin from the very moment she protested. Jackie had her tucked into her side, an arm gripping tight around her waist. Even as Shauna argued, she buried her face deeper into Jackie's chest, her fingers gripping the collar of her own worn flannel, the one in faded black and red that Jackie stole the most.

"I *meant* stay the night, Shipman."

Jackie smelled like citrus. Clean and fresh and intoxicating. Shauna tried to roll away to get some distance from her, to at least give herself a fighting chance at thinking clearly, but Jackie slipped her free hand beneath the back of Shauna's knee and pulled her even closer. All Shauna could manage was to hold her breath as Jackie tugged Shauna's leg over her body. Her hand lingered on Shauna's thigh.

"We have school tomorrow." Shauna wound a strand of Jackie's hair around her pinky, watching the golden wave bend and release over and over. "I didn't bring clothes."

"Well…" Jackie was smiling, Shauna could hear it in her voice. "I've got *great* news for you. I have, like, half your wardrobe in my closet."

Shauna pushed herself up on an elbow quickly enough that Jackie didn't have time to intervene. She was fully prepared to make a sarcastic comment about the clothing situation, because it was absolutely Jackie's fault for hoarding them, but Jackie's eyes were glassy with unshed tears. Shauna hadn't heard that in her voice, only the smile that Jackie had wanted her to hear, and Jackie seemed to be flustered by Shauna catching her in the act. She chewed her lip nervously, her face and chest pinkening.

"Jax, what's wrong?" Shauna automatically reached for her cheek, running her thumb across the apple of it.

The motion was second nature. They'd been comforting each other since they were little kids—hugs for scraped knees, pats on the back for disappointing grades and, when they were older and a little drunk and completely alone, kisses for broken hearts they'd torn in two with their own hands.

Jackie screwed up her face, shutting her eyes so tight her long lashes were no longer visible.

"Jackie?"

"I just…" Jackie unclenched her muscles and met Shauna's gaze reluctantly. Shauna wiped at a single tear that slid down her cheek. Jackie laughed, quiet and light and sort of pained, and shook her head. "I miss you. Is that crazy? I know I see you all the time, but thinking about you going home right now just… I'd miss you and your mom is working tonight and my parents aren't back for two more days and I just… thought you'd want to stay."

It was so much more transparent than Jackie tended to be with Shauna. Normally, Jackie would've whined more or claimed that she was scared to sleep in the house alone (even though they both knew she preferred it when her parents were out of town). It made something tighten in Shauna's chest.

"Shipman?" Jackie tapped Shauna's wrist lightly. "I know I'm, like, a little *weird* but I don't think you need to go all silent on me about it. It's not a big deal, if you want to go home that's—"

Shauna moved without thought, her forehead immediately finding Jackie's neck again, this time the side furthest from her, so that she had to lay almost fully on top of Jackie to reach.

"Oh," Jackie giggled, breathless from the sudden weight.

"I miss you, too, sometimes," Shauna mumbled into her skin. 'When I go home.' *Or when you go out with Jeff,* she wanted to add. "I… I get it. I'll stay."

Jackie didn't say anything. She wrapped her arms tight around Shauna's waist and took deep breaths that rocked Shauna's torso, calm little waves that lifted her up and settled her back down, over and over and over.

PRESENT

For the hour they spent on the road, Shauna and Jackie did a phenomenal job of pretending that it was just a normal drive. Shauna driving, Jackie riding shotgun. *Normal.* Twenty-five years ago, at least.

They headed west, with no real destination in mind. Shauna didn't ask Jackie why the hell she'd disappeared for all these years, or how long she'd been with the bouncy woman in the pink scrubs. Jackie didn't ask Shauna why she'd married Jeff, or what the fuck she was doing still living in Wiskayok. They hit pause. A mutual, unspoken agreement not to push each other. They'd always been good at unspoken agreements.

So, in service of that accord, they drove mostly in still silence, speaking only to work out the occasional loose plan, moving only to adjust the hands held between them. It was enough for Shauna, trapping Jackie's fingers between her own. She focused on how solid they were—heavy and warm and twitching with life—compared to the conjured figment of a Jackie that Shauna was used to. They ignored the questions and emotions and frenetic energy between them, each risking small glances at the other when they got the chance.

Driving like this, late at night on pitch-dark winding roads, exhaustion and shock and excitement and pain settling in, for any amount of time was a stretch. They made it forty miles before pulling into the nearly empty lot of a shitty motel.

“We’d like a room for the night, please,” Jackie said.

A room. *One* room.

“Only got single kings left,” the clerk yawned. The thick mascara coating her lashes flaked off beneath her eyes as she squeezed them shut. “That a problem?”

Shauna held her breath. She may have been surprised by Jackie’s choice to have them share a room, but her heart was already set on it. A shared room meant seeing Jackie in her pajamas, her skin stripped of makeup. It meant existing beside her for an entire night, listening to her sleep. Watching her, if Shauna was brave enough. Shauna wanted that. She needed that.

But Jackie could tell her to go sleep in the fucking car and she probably would. So, while every fiber of her being was hoping that Jackie would say *that’s fine* and grant Shauna the gift of spending a night with her, Shauna wasn’t about to say a single word.

“That’s just fine,” Jackie answered. She handed over a hefty stack of cash, more than Shauna thought was fit or sane, to make up for the lack of a credit card or ID. The clerk raised an eyebrow at her, but counted the bills and sorted them into the old school register all the same.

Jackie thrust her hand out, palm up for the key, as Shauna’s brain buzzed. The din of delighted panic was growing familiar. She tried to quell her excitement, to remind herself that there was a chance Jackie would ask if she minded sleeping in the fucking bathtub. She fought to keep her mind empty, to go into all of this with no expectations.

But…

But Jackie holding her hand in the car. Jackie sneaking glances at her. Jackie giving her sweet little smiles as she drove. Just like she used to.

The moment they entered their room, the relatively relaxed limbo of the car ride vanished. Walking through the door meant crossing an emotional threshold, too—a new environment, one that threatened a different kind of closeness. They blinked at each other, hovering in the center of the room, until Shauna broke the silence.

“You’re… sure that this,” Shauna nodded toward the bed, “is okay with you?”

“Oh.” Jackie cocked her head to the side. “I assumed you’d be sleeping on the floor.”

Shauna couldn’t tell if she was joking. Had this happened during the time before, she would’ve been certain that it was a joke. She would’ve laughed at Jackie, rolled her eyes, maybe even grabbed her sides and pushed her onto the bed playfully. But now… well, she *thought* it was a joke, but she wouldn’t allow assumption to disturb their delicate balance.

“I—” she stammered, with no clue where her own sentence was headed. She trailed off, her cheeks burning red.

“*Kidding*, Shauna,” Jackie said, with a smile so small it was almost shy. “If it wasn’t fine with me, I wouldn’t have said yes. If *you’d* rather have separate rooms—”

“No!” Shauna assured her, louder than she’d meant to. “No, I’m… this is good.”

“Thought so.” Jackie grinned. It reached her eyes this time.

She scanned Shauna’s face, and again Shauna thought that Jackie seemed to be just as shocked as Shauna was. It didn’t make any fucking sense. Jackie *knew* that Shauna was alive, probably knew that she was still in New Jersey, that she had a daughter, all of it. Shauna wasn’t a difficult person to google. And yet, Jackie looked at Shauna like she couldn’t believe that she was real. It made Shauna feel less alone—somehow they were in this together, both of them in shock, both of them anxious and giddy and terrified—but she couldn’t quite grasp what the hell it meant.

“I was going to shower,” Jackie said over her shoulder, already hunched over her suitcase to pull her things out. “That okay with you?”

“Oh, uh… yeah.” Shauna rubbed the back of her neck, shifting her weight side to side. “Go ahead.”

Jackie spent fifteen minutes in the bathroom. Shauna suffered for every single second of them. She tried to busy herself. She had to busy herself, because the part of her that remained untamed and feral was urging her to slam the bathroom door open, and the part of her that was closer to a normal, presentable human was fighting to go through Jackie’s things, to risk getting caught with her nose buried in the sweet smell of Jackie’s clothes.

Shauna unpacked the things that she would need to get ready for bed. She sent Callie a quick text, asking her to check in the next morning. She plugged her phone in to charge. She pulled the covers back for them, wondered if that was weird, thought about pulling them back up, and told herself to stop thinking about the goddamn covers. Jackie did come out, eventually, dressed in a matching striped pajama top and shorts, her hair wrapped in a towel, and Shauna’s chest grew instantly lighter.

It was in that moment that Shauna knew she was absolutely screwed for the future, whatever it may bring. There was no world in which Jackie could conceivably go from no contact, to allowing Shauna to stand by her side every moment of the day, every day of the year, for the rest of their lives. If fear crippled Shauna when Jackie was mere feet away, with nothing but a flimsy wooden door between them, what was she meant to do when circumstances no longer forced them together? Jackie, it seemed to Shauna, had come back to ruin her for good.

Jackie smirked, shaking her hair free. Shauna snapped to, realized that to Jackie it’d likely seemed as though Shauna had been ogling her. To be fair, Shauna wasn’t sure there was a better word for what she’d been doing, just then. Jackie was beautiful like this, her face bare, her wet hair clinging to her cheeks.

Shauna cleared her throat. “I’ll, uh… I’ll just go get ready for bed.”

She slipped past Jackie without giving her time to respond.

Shauna spent five minutes in the bathroom. Nearly half of that time was used to stare herself down in the crappy, warped mirror, and beg herself to get a grip. She set her toothbrush next to Jackie’s after she used it—a sight so stunning she had to pray it wasn’t mirage. It seemed like such a small thing, but it hit Shauna soundly in the gut. They’d started leaving toothbrushes at each other’s houses when they were ten years old. Eight years of seeing Jackie’s toothbrush next to her own, followed by twenty-five years of not.

Her heart skipped a beat—genuinely, clinically fluttered—as she reentered the main room. Jackie was sitting up in bed, staring at her. It felt even more dreamlike than the rest of the evening, because it was a dream that Shauna'd had so regularly: stepping into a bedroom where Jackie Taylor was waiting for her, looking up at her expectantly.

Shauna had always spent her weekdays looking forward to weekend nights with Jackie, because those nights meant holding her close, sharing breaths. Almost always, it was Jackie who would curl into Shauna first, giving Shauna silent permission to cling to her in return. When Shauna laid on her back, Jackie would drop her head onto Shauna's chest and throw an arm across her stomach, humming happily when Shauna looped an arm around her in turn. When Shauna laid down facing Jackie, she would turn away from her and inch backward until she was flush against Shauna's body, waiting for Shauna to place an arm around her waist. When Shauna faced away from her, Jackie would wrap around her immediately, pull her as close as she could, even slip an arm under Shauna's head for her to use as a pillow.

Jackie was a moth to Shauna's flame. It made Shauna feel so wanted. She met Jackie's touch with enthusiasm every single time, but she usually let Jackie initiate it. It was their routine, even though they never once talked about it.

She couldn't believe that she was getting in bed with Jackie. *Finally.* After dreams about it, fantasies about it, nights spent sobbing about it. All those years spent knowing, as certain as death, that she would never hold Jackie again. Her heart jumped, pounding against her ribs.

But Jackie hadn't said anything about letting Shauna actually touch her, so Shauna tried hopelessly to calm herself.

"Are you just going to stand there looking at me all night?" Jackie ran her fingers through her hair, pushing it back off of her face, and they trembled just enough for Shauna to notice. "I mean, I know you said you're very into the whole *looking at me* thing right now, but… I was thinking maybe we should attempt the *sleeping* thing if we've got to take on the whole world tomorrow?"

"Right. Sorry." Shauna crossed the room and slipped into bed.

She laid on her back, her hands folded on her stomach, unsettled and aching with the need to touch Jackie. Jackie switched off the lamp and slid down, tense in matching Shauna's position.

As always, Jackie was the first to speak, whispering into the night: "Shauna?"

"Yeah?"

It was dark, but as Shauna glanced at Jackie she thought she saw the ghost of a frown on her face.

"Can I…" Jackie turned onto her side to face Shauna as she trailed off, lifting her head off of the bed.

The need Shauna felt for Jackie made her desperate. Her stomach churned, turning over inside her. Her skin burned white-hot. Desperation made her brave.

"*Yes.*" Shauna extended the arm closest to Jackie, letting it fill the space Jackie's cheek had just vacated, and lifted her other arm up.

Good God, please let that be what she meant. Please let that—

Jackie slid into Shauna in one motion, her head seeking Shauna's chest, her hair brushing Shauna's cheek. She draped her arm across Shauna's ribcage lightly. She didn't get as close as she might've before—didn't slip a leg between Shauna's lazily or sneak a hand under Shauna's shirt to rest it against her bare skin—but she sank into her. Shauna wrapped her in her arms without a hint of hesitation, pulling her closer.

"Shauna?" Jackie said, her breath hot against the exposed skin of Shauna's neck.

Shauna shivered. "Yeah?"

"You're holding your breath."

The next morning began so uneventfully that Shauna should have felt the storm looming on the horizon. Following in their longstanding tradition of ignoring any intimacy between them once the sun rose on a new day, neither woman mentioned how they'd spent the entire night curled up in one another, let alone what it meant. Shauna got a text from Callie, saying that she and Jeff had made it to the beach house and that she wanted *more details right now,* because *dad doesn't know shit.* Jackie went to a cafe down the road and brought them back some coffee and pastries for a late breakfast. Shauna paced anxiously for the duration of her ten-minute absence. They ate in bed, cross-legged. Shauna wanted to freeze that moment in time, to suspend them in the happy bubble they'd created. She really did.

But she couldn't.

She didn't have the strength to ignore the fury rising in her. Holding Jackie the night before had pushed her over the edge. It'd set something off in her that she couldn't reign back in. Touching her, listening to her breathe. It was too much.

Jackie had stayed gone for so long. She'd let Shauna's heart be ripped to shreds not just once, but more times than Shauna could count, because every single day Jackie had made a conscious decision to keep Shauna in the dark. And, every single day, Shauna had made a weak attempt at repairing the wounds, only for her to see or smell or hear something that reminded her of Jackie and have the seam ripped straight out. Again, and again, and again, the scraps growing more and more mangled, until the thing that sat beneath her breast was nothing but a bloodied heap. Jackie hadn't had the decency to simply *tell* Shauna, to allow Shauna to move on with her life, and Shauna couldn't pretend anymore.

She knew there were more objectively pressing questions. How did she survive, when Shauna had very much seen her frozen fucking corpse? Where the hell did she go for all those months? Did she even get rescued at the same time as them? What the fuck did Lottie have to do with it? Shauna wanted those answers, too, but Jackie had been reluctant to even entertain those lines of inquiry. And the angry, twisted thing inside of Shauna was focused solely on how Jackie could allow her to think that she was dead.

"Do you care about me, Jackie?" she asked. The words tumbled out of her mouth, all control gone, only adrenaline flowing.

“What?” Jackie’s lips, pale pink and perfectly curved, remained parted an inch in confusion.

Shauna licked her own and steeled herself. “Do you… do you even *care* about me?”

“Oh, we’re doing this now.” It was a statement rather than a question. Jackie pressed two fingers to each temple and rubbed slow circles.

Shauna gulped, her temper flaring at the non-answer.

“I love you, Shauna,” Jackie said plainly, as if Shauna had asked her the day of the week, or whether it was cold out.

It was amazing, truly, how their fight in the woods felt both like it’d happened in a different lifetime and like it’d happened yesterday. Moments ago, actually, as if no time had passed between those words and these. The interim they’d existed in during their blissful first night together was gone. There was no moving forward without finishing what they’d started out there.

“If you really *loved* me,” Shauna clutched her chest, clawing at herself, “you couldn’t have done this to me for so *fucking* long.”

Her pain was beginning to sound more like venom. She stood, towering over Jackie.

Jackie brought her knees to her chest, folding in on herself, making herself even smaller. Tears already streamed down her flushed cheeks, but her face was set with anger rather than sadness.

“You’re one to talk about what you can do to someone you love,” Jackie said, her tone still maddeningly even.

Years of agony came rushing out of Shauna, channeled directly at the woman she’d mourned every single day of her miserable fucking life.

“*Every* fucked up thing I did was because of love! I loved— *love* you so much it… it fucking *kills* me and you—you just—you didn’t even have the decency to tell me you were okay? That’s not love.”

“It is.” Jackie swallowed, wiping her cheeks angrily. “It *is* love. If—if what you did was love, everything I’ve done is—”

“*No!”* Shauna screamed, stomping her foot. The overwhelm was physical. Her chest tightened and her throat narrowed. She balled her hands into fists at her sides and pushed through exasperated sobs. “No! I—what I did wasn’t right. I know that, but that isn’t my point. It isn’t about what I—what I’ve done wrong, right now, it’s about the fact that you—”

“When will it be?” Jackie said. Her expression was stubbornly stoic but, just as they always had, her tears gave her away. They clung to her lashes, steered themselves down her cheeks in rivulets that dripped off of her chin and rolled down her neck. “When *will* it be about what you did?”

Shauna scoffed, because how dare she turn this around? How dare Jackie hurt her worse than anyone should ever have to hurt and then just… just show up and say *surprise, I’m fine!* and not take any fucking responsibility?

“No matter what I did to you, you know I couldn’t have done this. I couldn’t have—” Shauna took a gasping inhale. “You know I couldn’t have—have stayed away from you like that.”

A stretch of time passed in silence, save for Shauna’s shuddering sobs.

“I don’t know anything,” Jackie whispered eventually, her legs still tight against her chest, her nails digging into her thighs. “You were going to let me die, Shauna.”

“I… wasn’t… there wasn’t… I couldn’t have—” Shauna whimpered, her breaths pitching closer and closer to hyperventilation. “I—I—”

“You stayed away, too.” Jackie shook her head, and her face finally screwed up with pain. ‘I gave you so many chances to just fucking apologize. I was begging for one… one,’ Jackie held up a single, trembling finger, “word. One tiny hint that you even gave a fuck about me.”

Jackie covered her mouth with both hands to muffle a sharp cry. A strangled, broken sound that Shauna knew well. A tiny break in her facade, reserved for her most painful moments: her mother pushing a little too hard about her body or her grades or her relationship, Jeff making a joke at her expense in front of his idiot friends. Shauna had never heard Jackie make that sound when it was her doing.

Jackie slid her hands lower, interlaced her fingers and tucked them beneath her chin. She looked as if were physically holding her head upright out of necessity, as if she may come apart in front of Shauna, as if Shauna may be on the precipice of an elaborate delusion finally crashing down.

“I would’ve caved so fucking hard,” Jackie said. “I always did. And you gave me *nothing.* You left me first. You let go first.”

Shauna saw stars, black and white specks drifting in and out of her vision.

Wasn’t this her greatest regret? Her greatest shame?

Shauna had let Jackie die.

She’d let Jackie curl up outside and die alone, like a dog running off into the woods at the end of its life, trying its best not to inconvenience anyone with its death.

Except… except Jackie wasn’t dead. She was sitting on the bed in front of Shauna, looking so incredibly vulnerable. And Shauna was screaming at her. Twenty-five years of shit that she’d always attributed to endless, agonizing guilt for what she’d done to Jackie. If she could’ve told her eighteen-year-old self that she would get a second chance, that girl would’ve said that it didn’t *matter* what Jackie had done to her. She would’ve said that she deserved the pain, that she’d gladly accept it, that she’d take any piece of Jackie she could get. Yet, somehow, it had taken less than a day for Shauna to come down on Jackie, to try and force her into sharing the blame.

Sickened, Shauna’s anger retreated, replaced with more complex emotions, feelings that Shauna couldn’t begin to put into words.

“Jax… Jackie, I—I didn’t know… I couldn’t have known it was going to sn-snow like that.” The room swayed suddenly beneath Shauna’s feet. She lurched with the lightheadedness. “I never meant for—never would’ve…”

Jackie wasn't going to jump in and save her from herself this time. Shauna had leapt off of this cliff, set this in motion, and now she was flailing. But Jackie wasn't going to smooth it over for her. This was going to play out all the way to the end. Jackie looked wrecked by exhaustion, but she sat and watched Shauna sob through her own tears without intervention.

It was the first time in their lives that Jackie hadn't comforted Shauna when she'd cried like this. Jackie had never watched Shauna fall apart without rushing forward to pick up the pieces, to hold her together. Even when it was clearly Shauna's fault, even when they were just kids and Shauna was crying because she'd done something mean to Jackie, Jackie dropped everything to make her feel good again. Even when Jackie had shown up at Shauna's house the night before, forced to see dozens of pictures of her and Jeff plastered on the walls, having to take in years of their memories all at once. Shauna had cried, and Jackie had held them together.

And didn't that mean something? Didn't that mean everything?

"Jackie," Shauna sobbed. "I never would've let you stay out there if I'd known. I'm—I'm so fucking sorry."

"That's it?" Jackie spoke so quietly Shauna wasn't sure she'd heard her correctly.

"W-what?"

Jackie jumped to her feet. "I *said*, that's it? That's all you have to say for yourself?" She closed the distance between them, planting her hands on Shauna's shoulders and shoving her gently. *'You,'* another small shove, *"would,"* shove, *"have,"* shove, *"let,"* Jackie pressed her hands against Shauna's chest and Shauna gasped despite herself, *"me,"* her nails dug in above the collar of Shauna's sweater, scratching against her skin, *"die!"*

Jackie jerked her hands to her sides when Shauna reached for them. Shauna wrapped her arms around her chest instead, hugging herself to soothe the ache left by the sudden absence of Jackie's touch.

"If you say *snow* one more fucking time, I swear to God I will kick your ass," Jackie said. Her voice was hoarse, halfway to lost. Shauna gripped herself tighter, refusing to step backward when Jackie came closer. 'You know,' Jackie thrust a finger in Shauna's face, nearly brushing her nose, "good and well that the snow was not the only fucking problem. It was freezing. The only other time people intentionally slept outside, Van got her face ripped off by wolves. There was no way I was going to make it through the night without help, Shauna, fucking snow be damned!"

There was gravel in Jackie's voice, but it didn't stop her volume from ricocheting up. Someone banged twice from the other side of the wall, shouting an unintelligible reprimand. They ignored it.

"And you let me go. *Told* me to go. You watched everyone turn against me. It was… it was fucking bullshit, and you helped it happen. As far as you knew, I was killing myself and no one was coming to stop me."

Four more rough knocks.

"So you don't get to tell me whether I love you," Jackie whisper-yelled, crossing her arms against her chest. She was panting with effort, her chest heaving. "I had no reason to think

you *wanted* me to come around. Why the fuck would I? I didn't know if you… if you still hated me until I saw your reaction last night."

Oh.

Shauna hadn't considered how it would seem from Jackie's perspective. She'd been too wrapped up in her shock. There was no way for Jackie to know how deeply Shauna had grieved her loss. Sure, she'd known that Shauna was alive. She must've known that she'd married Jeff and had a daughter and stayed put in fucking New Jersey, but she had no way of knowing that Shauna's entire world had come crashing to a halt the moment Jackie had left it. She didn't know that Shauna had ended up… she didn't know. *Fuck.*

"You *married* Jeff. The last time I saw you, you told me our entire friendship was a lie and that you couldn't… couldn't stand me and then you quietly watched me try—very nearly successfully, might I add—to fucking kill myself, so excuse me for getting some mixed signals!"

Jackie's breathing slowed, and a single sob escaped her trembling lips. She dropped back down on the edge of the bed, her feet planted on the floor, her hands placed just above her knees to hold herself upright. Her entire body shook faintly, as if she were charged with electricity.

"K-kill yourself?" Shauna whispered, her brow furrowed. "What… I mean, what do you mean kill yourself?"

Jackie snapped her face up, her hair falling out of the neat bun she'd fixed it in earlier that morning, loose strands framing her face. She narrowed her eyes at Shauna, considering her.

"You think… I mean… you think *what?* Seriously, Shauna?" Jackie scoffed, her voice straining hard. "Are you telling me that you seriously think I… I what? Took an accidental fucking snow nap?"

Shauna slid her hands down her body until her arms fell to her sides. She played nervously with the fabric of her sleeves, pinching the cuffs between her fingers just like she had the night this fight had started, all those years ago. Fresh tears pricked at the back of her eyes. She felt so small. So young.

"*Jax,"* she pleaded.

"Jesus, Shauna." Jackie grimaced, shaking her head. "Of course you think I'm that fucking dumb."

"No," Shauna sobbed. "I don't."

"I guess I should've known. You told me as much. Just… you really think I gave up on starting a fire because I thought I wouldn't need one?"

Shauna shook her head slightly, almost imperceptibly, dazed.

"You told me that I was a worthless, insecure bitch with no future. You… the… the person I loved most in the entire world, the *only* person I *ever* trusted," Jackie's face twisted into a perfect image of pain, her lips downturned and her brow furrowed, "told me she fucking hated me. That our entire friendship was a lie. That she didn't even like me, let alone love me."

Shauna covered her mouth to muffle another sob.

“Then… then I walked out into the middle of the creepy fucking woods. It was so cold you could see your breath. I don’t know if you remember that, but I do.” Jackie sniffed, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

Too cold. Ice cold. Sheets of white and a pale blue that would’ve been pretty if it hadn’t been painting Jackie’s perfect lips or dancing across her cheekbones.

“And I knew that if I didn’t do something about the cold I would die. But I decided to just… let go. I didn’t see any reason to live. Not with you hating me. Not knowing everything between us was… was fucking fake to you.”

Shauna’s heart thudded against her ribs. She hadn’t known that she could hurt like this. She thought she’d experienced the worst pain life had to offer. She’d always wondered, in the deep corners of her mind, whether Jackie might’ve meant to… but Shauna couldn’t think about that. She couldn’t let herself think like that. She’d ignored the truth until she believed the lie.

An accident.

“I was killing myself.” Jackie’s voice cracked with every word. ‘The last time I saw you, I tried to kill myself. So no, I didn’t come running back to you. I wanted to so fucking badly and… God, that’s how I knew I couldn’t, because I knew I’d forgive you instantly, and I knew I would let you break my heart over and over if you wanted to.’ Shauna took a few hesitant steps toward Jackie, allowing her ample time to move away or tell her to back off. “Loving you was dangerous for me don’t you get it?”

Shauna closed the distance between them and sank to her knees in front of her. She placed her hands over Jackie’s.

“I was trying to protect myself,” Jackie whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Shauna choked out frantically. “I’m so sorry. I’m—”

Jackie let out a sharp, strangled cry. It sounded so nearly like a scream that Shauna thought it might’ve been, that maybe Jackie had lost her voice completely.

“Please?” Shauna wasn’t sure what exactly she was begging for, but Jackie seemed to know. She pitched forward, placing her forehead in the crook of Shauna’s neck.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Jackie’s sobs were noiseless, but Shauna could feel every inch of them. Jackie pulled her hands out from under Shauna’s and flung her arms around her neck, squeezing tight. Shauna took Jackie’s waist gently, the angle not quite right for her to wrap Jackie up completely.

“I’ve never hated you. Not for one second,” Shauna promised. Jackie’s tears were wet against her skin. “I wish… I just wish I could take it all back. I love you, Jackie. I love you so fucking much it hurts. I’ve never stopped loving you.”

Jackie slipped herself forward, her face still buried firmly in Shauna’s neck, and slid off of the bed. Shauna caught her waist, wrapping her arms all the way around her, and lowered her the rest of the way to the ground. The position was awkward, but Jackie was still clinging to

Shauna and she refused to interrupt that. She managed to slip an arm under Jackie's knees and lift her into her lap as she turned to sit fully on the ground.

It was much more comfortable, Shauna leaning against the bed, Jackie curled into her chest, one of Shauna's arms supporting her back. Shauna smoothed her free hand over Jackie's hair, and Jackie pressed herself even closer in response. Shauna pressed her lips to the crown of Jackie's head, buried her nose there and inhaled deep.

Jackie was allowed to fall apart, and Shauna was there to catch her.

They settled in.

"I want Chinese food."

Jackie stared at Shauna expectantly from across the room, where she was perched at the motel's small desk. She'd set it up as a makeshift vanity—a handheld mirror perched atop a stack of folded clothes, a half-dozen products in sleek black and silver packaging scattered around her. Her voice was hoarse, nothing more than a glorified whisper.

"Hmm." Shauna opened the nightstand and pulled a stack of old takeout menus from its drawer. 'You're in luck. Green Leaf Chinese,' she offered with a cautious smile, waving the sun bleached menu. "Let's just hope they're still open. This looks a little… dated."

Jackie was perfectly made up. Her hair was back in a neat bun on top of her head, a few shorter locks left out to frame her face. She had on simple makeup, a touch of eyeliner and mascara, dusty pink across her cheeks and on her lips. Her clothes were plain, just as they had been the day before, a tight black tank top hugging her curves, tucked into dark jeans. Over it she wore a white long sleeve shirt, silk, left unbuttoned, no stains, no wrinkles. Just perfect.

She did not look like she'd spent the past few hours sobbing, curled tight in Shauna's arms.

It'd been messy. They'd both actively cried for longer than Shauna had previously thought possible. It had been a mass catharsis, a release of everything they'd been holding. Even after the tears had run out, they'd stayed tangled up in one another, pressed together in that way that leaves imprints from clothing and carpet stamped into your skin. They'd shifted when their limbs fell asleep, but that's all the movement they'd done. They'd just existed together, all hot breath and sticky skin, until Jackie had decided it was time to get up.

Shauna had replayed the words Jackie had said to her over and over as she showered, turning the water so cold it cut her skin like ice, committing them to memory.

"I forgive you. For that night, for all of it, I forgive you."

Shauna hadn't felt remotely put together when she'd left the bathroom. And there was Jackie, looking beautiful and calm and so very normal, asking about dinner.

"Do you want to go pick it up or eat there?" Shauna asked, missing the mark for beautiful and calm but aiming to match Jackie on normal.

"Oh, take-out for sure." Jackie readjusted, pulling her legs up underneath her. "Do you want me to go pick it up?"

“Let’s go together.” Shauna was twitchy, eager to respond. Jackie tilted her head and bit the inside of her cheek. “I just… I feel like with the weird cult stuff going on it’s safer?”

Shauna couldn’t stand to be away from Jackie. It was deep and primal and something physical within her. She felt possessive and protective of her in a way she’d never experienced. When Jackie had left for ten minutes that morning to get them coffee, Shauna had been a nervous wreck the entire time. She’d only managed to fight the urge to barrel out the door after Jackie out of an even deeper fear: that succumbing to her impulses would scare Jackie off.

Jackie seemed to want space. To need freedom. Shauna couldn’t put a finger on it exactly, but something told her that Jackie wouldn’t react well if Shauna acted on her instinctual desire to cling to her. Something told her that she needed to reign herself in.

Besides, there *was* weird cult shit going on. That much was true.

“So,” Jackie whispered, “who do we trust?”

They sat across from each other on the bed again, takeout containers spread between them. Shauna swallowed the large bite she’d just taken and sighed, scrunching her nose. “Nobody?”

“Well, yeah.” Jackie smiled and nudged Shauna’s leg with her foot. “But who do we want to reach out to?”

“Nobody?” Shauna attempted again, trying and failing to keep a smirk off of her face.

Jackie rolled her eyes. “Well, short of running away together and never looking back,” Jackie’s voice cracked, and she cleared her throat, “we don’t really have an option for dealing with this shit alone.”

Shauna blushed furiously. “That doesn’t sound like a bad option.”

She took another bite quickly, so that she wouldn’t have to respond immediately to whatever Jackie had to say.

“Okay, well… you’re right.” Jackie was flushed. She dragged her fingers through her hair, then used the same hand to fan herself briefly. “But I probably shouldn’t have presented it as an option, because it isn’t, really. We need to find Nat. I need to like, work, and you have a teenage daughter who might have some objections to running away and never talking to that on-again, off-again boyfriend of hers again.”

Of course Jackie, who had known Callie for all of a day, had thought of her before Shauna had. Shauna was ready to bolt, seriously would’ve considered fleeing the country with Jackie if she asked.

“Yeah, well.” Shauna shrugged, wiping sweat off of her brow; God, it felt as though the heat had been kicked on high. “A girl can dream.”

Shauna tried to pass it off as a joke. Jackie smiled, biting her lip in a way that revealed nothing about how it landed.

“We’ve got to call Lottie,” Jackie said.

She spun her fork nervously, picking at noodles that Shauna had a feeling she wasn't going to eat.

"I know you want an explanation for everything. I know." Jackie abandoned her fork, dropping it in the styrofoam container. "But I'm asking you not to push me, okay? Because really, I think it'd take, like, a week straight of sitting in this room and talking for us to explain everything to each other. Everything we missed. All of it."

Shauna bit her tongue. She wanted to take Jackie's face between her hands, to shake her, to beg her to do just that. To *take* that week. To say fuck everyone else, it's you and me against the world, babe.

It was what Jackie had used to tell Shauna. When a boy took Shauna on a disappointing date, when her dad bailed on his visitation, when the other girls made fun of the way her swimsuit clung to her chest in middle school.

Fuck everyone else, it's you and me against the world, babe.

"And we don't have time, and I…" Jackie faltered, and Shauna did reach for her. She didn't boldly clutch her cheeks, she just offered Jackie her hand. Jackie took it loosely. Shauna wished she'd squeeze until they had matching bruises. "I don't want to do that yet."

Shauna shut her eyes and took a slow, even breath, exhaling through pursed lips. Jackie waited until she opened them to continue.

"But she's the reason I'm here and the reason I came to you and maybe you can give her some credit for that and you don't have to trust her, because honestly do any of us trust anyone really?" Jackie swallowed hard. "But I want us to call her. Together."

Jackie finally squeezed her hand. Not hard enough to bruise, but hard enough to make Shauna feel something. "Okay."

"Okay?" Jackie looked pleasantly surprised, her lips parted in the beginning of a smile.

"Yeah, let's do it." Shauna watched Jackie lick her lips, her tongue darting out for just a second, before she pressed them closed. "Besides, I want—I *need* those journals back. But after that, I need to call Tai."

"Deal," Jackie said

Lottie was first. She sounded distant and airy, her tone the same as it'd been after the first few months in the wilderness changed them all. She assured Shauna that the journals were safe, that she hadn't read them, had *no interest in reading them, actually,* but thought that they really ought to destroy them.

Shauna's heart pounded. She slipped toward panic, but Jackie squeezed her shoulder and answered for her, promising they'd talk about it later. Lottie acquiesced easily to Jackie, but when Jackie told her they would get back in touch when they knew more about Nat, Lottie threw them a curveball.

"Oh, she's okay. As okay as the rest of us, at least."

Jackie didn't push for more information, but Lottie offered something else to startle Shauna regardless, just before she cut the call: "I'm happy for you guys."

Shauna locked eyes with Jackie; had she spoken to Lottie at some point without Shauna noticing? Texted her, maybe? Jackie just shrugged in return.

The call with Tai went about as well as Shauna had expected it would. Tai didn't even say hello when she picked up, choosing instead to snap at her immediately.

"Where the *fuck* have you been? I mean, seriously? Nat gets herself kidnapped, Misty calls me seventeen times during a meeting, and your ass is nowhere to be found? I had to deal with *Misty,* Shauna. Alone."

"I have a life, Tai," Shauna said. "Sorry I couldn't jump in at a moment's notice."

"Oh, yeah, the stay at home mom thing." Tai's betrayal was poorly cloaked in put-on boredom. "I get it. Much more demanding than the fucking state senator gig."

"*Taissa,"* Shauna warned.

"Well, I got her back, anyway." Tai sighed. "Misty and I did, that is. Misty was convinced you got yourself kidnapped too, by the way. Apparently you told her you would meet her at your house?"

Jackie pursed her lips and widened her eyes at Shauna. But Tai hadn't mentioned Jackie, so Misty must not have spilled.

"You need to call her," Tai pressed on.

"Wait, wait. You got Nat back?" Shauna asked. "Where the hell was she?"

Lottie had been right about Nat, but it didn't make any sense. There was no way any of the others were still in contact with her. Then again, it hadn't made sense that Lottie had known Nat was in trouble in the first place, unless she had something to do with it.

"She's fine. A little shaken up," Tai said. 'Fought the fuckers hard. I couldn't get a lot out of her, to be honest.' The sound of papers shuffling, Tai working like always, even as she explained this. "She was in this… empty warehouse in the middle of nowhere. They just *left* her there, tied up, with a note and a cell phone. Almost like they realized she wasn't worth the fight. You know Nat." Tai's tone carried a hint of pride. "But who knows, this could've been their plan from the beginning. So, anyway, Nat called Misty, who I was already with at that point, because she blew my phone up until I met her at your empty fucking house."

"Sorry," Shauna mumbled.

Avoiding fucking with Tai's head like that would've been Shauna's top priority, under any other circumstances it really would've been. But with Jackie suddenly in the picture again… well, Shauna found herself incapable of considering anyone else.

Taissa ignored the interruption. "And Misty called a shady hacker friend to trace the phone. They're together now and I'm back at work. It's going to take me a bit to get away, but I think we all need to get together. This shit can't keep happening, we need to squash it."

Jackie gave Shauna's hand two quick squeezes to catch her attention. *"A note?"* she mouthed.

"What did the note say?" Shauna asked.

“Oh, you know, the new normal. Something vaguely threatening with the damn symbol drawn in.” Shauna could almost see Tai waving a dismissive hand in the air. “*There’s more where this came from*, or something like that. Call Misty, she and Nat held on to it. I’ve got to go. Do not go off the grid like that again, Shauna. I mean it.”

“I won’t,” Shauna promised.

(She would, though, if she had to. If it was for Jackie.)

“Do you think Misty told her about me?” Jackie asked, as soon as Shauna hung up.

“Definitely not. She would’ve said something,” Shauna said. “Do you want to be part of this call or do you want to pretend you don’t exist and hope Misty forgets?”

Jackie grinned, laughing lightly through her nose. “Can we play it by ear? I don’t know about letting Nat know right now. I feel like she’s been through enough.”

Jackie ended up staying silent as Misty tore into Shauna for going missing. She demanded to know where Shauna went, but she didn’t mention Jackie. Why she would hide Jackie’s presence from Nat, Shauna wasn’t sure. Shauna made the mistake of asking how Nat was, and was met promptly with an earful on how it was *shocking that she even cared, seeing how she disappeared after finding out Nat was in danger.* Misty clearly wasn’t going to drop it.

“Listen, Misty, it was a… a family emergency. Okay?” Shauna offered her half-assed excuse through gritted teeth. She hated every moment of groveling to Misty, always had. “I’m sorry. But I’m here now. We need to meet up. This is getting out of hand. Tai’s working, but she’s going to try to step away. Just… just wait on me, okay? I’ll find a spot. Just don’t go anywhere, and don’t let Nat out of your sight.”

“Funny how you get to go AWOL and still manage to think you’re in charge when you get back,” Misty said, her tone sickly sweet. “But, then again, you’ve always sort of been this way. They do say old habits die hard.”

Shauna sighed. “Does that sound agreeable to you, Misty?” she asked, her voice tight and clipped.

“Sure, but… are you bringing a *plus one* to this little meeting?” Misty added, in a low whisper.

Jackie shook her head.

“I’ve got to go,” Shauna said. “Talk later.”

Shauna ended the call and switched the phone off completely. She needed quiet, needed to think without the threat of Misty blowing up her phone at the slight of being hung up on.

“Okay,” Jackie rubbed the back of her neck, “so… what the fuck do we do now? I mean, does anything seem clearer to you after all that?”

“Nope,” Shauna said. “I’ve got nothing.”

Jackie shook her foot rapidly, clearly on edge, on the brink of a plan.

“What is it?” Shauna tried to look at Jackie as gently as possible, tried not to let it show just how badly she wanted to sink her fingers in and never let go.

“I think… well, I think you’re right about meeting up,” Jackie said. ‘But, I think we need to get everyone together. Like, as in, every single one of us.’ *Jesus fucking Christ.* “It’s too messy right now. Nobody trusts each other, nobody wants to tell the whole truth. We’re missing pieces of the story and I think we need to force everyone to, I don’t know, just… face each other. I know I could be wrong, but something in my gut tells me this… *shit* isn’t one of us. This is an outsider. And even if it is one of us, at this point who cares? We have to deal with it.”

Shauna wasn’t sure about this being an outsider at all, but there was something to be said for forcing everyone into a room together, no matter how much she dreaded it.

“I think you’re right,” Shauna said. “About getting everyone together. But I don’t think they’ll do it if we tell them.”

Shauna hated to suggest lying to Jackie, worried that it might make her seem like an even worse person, that it showed too much of who she really was. But, to Shauna’s surprise, Jackie just nodded in agreement.

“Jackie…” Shauna added hesitantly. “Who… who all is *everyone* to you? I mean, who do you… talk to?”

Jackie took a deep breath and scooted herself closer to Shauna. She took both of Shauna’s hands in her own. Shauna looked down at the comforter beneath them, feigning sudden interest in the gaudy pattern.

“Hey.” Jackie’s voice was still raspy, still cute and—if Shauna was being honest with herself—sexy, like she’d always found it when Jackie lost her voice. Shauna knew she was waiting for her to look up, but she resisted. “Look at me, yeah?”

Jackie asked, so Shauna complied. Jackie squeezed her hands in acknowledgment. “One day I’m going to tell you everything. One day you and I are going to… go away together and we’re going to answer each others’ questions. All of them. I promise.” Shauna nodded enthusiastically, tears spilling over her cheeks. “But for now, I need you to not get mad. I need to be able to tell you the things you need to know without you getting angry, okay?”

“Jax.” Shauna brushed her thumbs over Jackie’s hands. ‘Just tell me.’ Jackie raised an eyebrow at her. “Yes, okay. I won’t get mad,” Shauna promised. “I understand.”

Jackie nodded once. “Lottie and Van. The only people I talk to are Lottie and Van. They’re the only people who know, and they only know because they’ve… always known.”

It made perfect, awful sense.

All those times that Lottie and Van had run off together, up to God knows what. Some of those trips were to see Jackie. Maybe they were always going to see Jackie. Maybe every single time Shauna had wondered what the hell they could possibly be up to, they were visiting Jackie—talking to her, hugging her, listening to her laugh and cry.

Shauna didn’t have to go against her word; she wasn’t angry. She was heartbroken.

She couldn’t be angry. Not in the way she expected herself to be. She should want to tear Lottie and Van into pieces. But Jackie was alive and safe and warm and sharing a bed with Shauna. She couldn’t be mad about that.

She must've been silent for a little too long, must've shown her pain, because Jackie slipped her hands out of Shauna's in favor of resting them on her cheeks and leaned forward, searching her eyes. Shauna felt her heart skip another beat. Jackie leaned in slowly. Shauna held her breath until Jackie's nose was just inches from her own. Jackie closed the distance, pressing her lips right next to the corner of Shauna's mouth. It could really no longer be considered her cheek, because if Shauna had so much as twitched, Jackie's lips would be brushing against her own.

Jackie pulled her lips away, but not her face. Shauna instinctively tilted her head forward, pressing her forehead to Jackie's. Jackie left her hands on Shauna's cheeks, which Shauna knew must've been hot to the touch. Shauna almost pressed a chaste kiss to Jackie's lips, thought that maybe they could pass it off as something innocent, something normal for old friends. She almost convinced herself that they could pretend again, for something that small.

She knew, though, that she couldn't have stopped there. She had no idea what Jackie wanted, but Shauna had been aching to kiss her, touch her, be with her since the second she'd seen her standing in her kitchen. Just below her shock ran an equally strong current of desire, difficult to control even when Jackie was all the way across the room. This was pushing Shauna's limits.

Her fear of abandonment, of Jackie once again becoming a figment of her imagination, was the only thing that gave her the strength to pull away. She took Jackie's hands back into her own, drawing them off of her face and onto the bed between them once more.

"Okay." Shauna cleared her throat. "So, Van."

"Yeah." Jackie blinked particularly hard, and a single tear fell with it. "And I don't think I can tell her. I think we can tell Lottie. I think she's been expecting this, to be honest, but Van… I'm going to have to trick her."

Jackie looked pained, as though the prospect of lying to Van was causing her physical discomfort.

"Okay." Shauna nodded. "Well, I think the best move for the rest of them is to make them think it's just me they're meeting. Just the four of us, like it has been. But they're going to be pissed. Well, Nat and Tai are, at least."

Shauna didn't pretend to know what went through Misty's head.

"Van will be too, but I just…" Jackie tossed her head back and swallowed, her throat bobbing. "I don't know what else to do."

"So, where do we meet? We can't do it in public," Shauna said. She watched the swell of Jackie's lip as Jackie worried it between her teeth, but forced her eyes back up to Jackie's intermittently, each time she remembered that she had no business staring at Jackie Taylor's lips. "All the potential… explosions aside, we can't have the Yellowjackets seen together. It'll be everywhere in an instant."

"Lottie has houses, like, all over," Jackie said. "We could use one of those?"

"I don't…" Shauna struggled to come up with a nicer way of saying *no fucking way.* "It seems like… not neutral territory, I guess."

“Let’s pick a place. You and me. Rent an Airbnb or something.” Jackie slipped her hands out of Shauna’s, sliding them up to her forearms and squeezing. Shauna’s breath hitched. “I’m sick of this motel anyway, and it might be a good idea for us to have a place to stay. We can use my fake name and Lottie’s money. She won’t mind. We can pick, okay?”

“Okay.” Shauna exhaled gratefully. “Okay, yeah.”

“None of us like going without,” Jackie said, as Shauna helped her load a cartful of groceries and toiletries into the trunk. “I don’t want people to, like… panic out of reflex. There’s enough reasons to be upset.”

They’d ended up staying another night at the motel, cherishing their last hours alone together in their little bubble, eating takeout and letting trashy reality TV and old movies play in the background. They’d talked intermittently, sometimes about nothing at all, sometimes about serious things. About how they thought everyone would react, about Callie, about Jackie’s job. It was comfortable. And they’d immediately curled into one another that night, Jackie spooning Shauna for most of it, Shauna willing her heart to stop beating so loud. But now, it was time to prepare for the onslaught of the outside world.

Shauna nodded and brushed some stray hairs out of Jackie’s face. “You’re right, Jax.”

They’d gotten so comfortable touching each other again. They’d always been that way, very hands on. Jackie would drape herself across Shauna’s lap at parties, Shauna would sit on the floor in front of her and lean back against her legs while she played with her hair. They were constantly hugging and holding hands and *God,* they really had been obvious hadn’t they? Over the past few days, they’d jumped back into old habits, drawn together with the magnetic force of deep, physical memory. Shauna didn’t know whether it would last when they left their private motel room and started having to exist in front of the others.

Lottie knew the plan in its entirety, though she’d given no hints to indicate how she actually felt about it. Van thought that she was meeting Lottie and Jackie. Misty, Nat, and Tai —who’d managed to convince her team that she needed a few days to recover from the campaigning—thought that they were meeting Shauna. Everyone knew they might be staying a night or two. (Misty thought they ought to set up camp there semi-permanently, because of course she did.)

Jackie had told Rachel that she was stuck in Montreal for at least a few more days, Shauna’s stomach churning when Jackie stepped outside partway through the call. Shauna had texted Jeff that she would check in tomorrow, then she’d called Callie’s school and told them she would be out for the foreseeable future for a family emergency. She’d fired off a text to Callie that read *we are fine, be good* and ignored the seven question marks Callie sent in response.

Jackie and Shauna were the first ones to the house, arriving an hour before everyone else was set to. It was huge—secluded enough to not draw attention, but not anywhere close to remote, for obvious reasons. It was near where they’d driven when they’d initially decided to flee without direction, a few hours away from where most of the women lived. There were five bedrooms, four bathrooms, and a giant open living space that connected to an enormous kitchen. They unloaded the groceries first, Jackie carefully arranging them in the fridge and

walk-in pantry. She left some fruit and snacks out on the counter, along with a few bottles of wine.

“Can’t hurt.” Jackie shrugged at Shauna, who’d just finished dividing the toiletries among the bathrooms.

Shauna felt a rush of love toward Jackie, an irresistible urge to touch her. Jackie was so clearly terrified, arguably about to be put through the most of any of them, but she was still trying to make this as easy on everyone else as possible. Trying to think of everyone’s needs and meet them preemptively. Shauna could feel Jackie’s brain whirring, even though she was trying to keep a calm exterior.

Shauna felt emboldened, knowing that everything could change between them when the others arrived. So, while Jackie was futzing with things on the counter, Shauna walked up behind her. She slipped her arms around Jackie’s middle and pressed her forehead to her temple.

Jackie gasped and Shauna froze, tensing her muscles against any movement, holding her breath to prevent it from hitting Jackie’s cheek. But, just as Shauna thought she ought to slip away and pretend like nothing had happened, Jackie surprised her. Jackie sank back into her with a sigh, letting her head fall onto her shoulder. Shauna’s nose fell to her neck instead of her cheek. Her lips were only inches from Jackie’s skin and, if she moved just a hair, she could press them—

Jackie placed both hands on top of Shauna’s forearms suddenly, but instead of pulling Shauna away like she feared Jackie might, she began rubbing slow circles across Shauna’s skin with her thumbs.

“Definitely can’t hurt,” Shauna said softly.

Jackie gasped, breathy and light, and heat shot through Shauna’s abdomen.

The truth of it was, from the time they were about fifteen, Jackie and Shauna had barely gone a day without touching each other in a way that could’ve been considered questionable. They’d had an unspoken arrangement (and maybe if they’d just spoken about it things would’ve been different). But they didn’t say it then, and it seemed as though they wouldn’t be saying it now either, because as suddenly as she’d leaned in, Jackie was pulling away and clearing her throat.

“We should put our stuff in a room.” Jackie tucked her hair behind her ear and pulled her top down where Shauna’s grip had caused it to ride up.

“You pick.” Shauna studied her, looking for any signs of discomfort with what had just happened. She found none. “I’ll go get our bags.”

Shauna came back in moments later, carrying her duffel and rolling Jackie’s suitcase. “Jackie?” she called.

“In here!”

Shauna found her—regardless of her quiet, strained response—in a clean, simple bedroom with a queen bed and an ensuite bathroom.

“Think this is okay?” Jackie looked up at Shauna from where she sat, perched at the foot of the bed.

“Yeah,” Shauna said. “I think it’s great.”

Shauna didn’t give a single fuck what the room looked like, as long as she was sharing it with Jackie.

“I figured we should just take one of the rooms with one bed because if everyone ends up staying then two other people will have to share.” Jackie shrugged with one shoulder, raising it to her ear. “And I’m sure Van and Lottie won’t mind but they would probably prefer two beds, so… I just assumed you’d be okay…” Jackie trailed off, sweeping her arm back to motion at the bed behind her.

Shauna smirked, setting their things down in front of the closet door.

“I mean, I don’t even know if everyone will agree to stay, so if not we can just…” Jackie was shy suddenly, her eyes cast down at her feet, “you know we can, like, take another room and split up.”

“Jax,” Shauna said carefully, “the rest of the rooms could be empty and I’d still rather stay here with you, if you’d have me.”

They’d lost twenty-five years to lies and bullshit. It was time for Shauna to be honest with Jackie, in whatever ways she could. Within reason, of course.

Jackie played with the hem of her shirt between nervous fingers. “Yeah.” She breathed out shakily, nodding. “Yeah, okay. Good.”

Luckily—or unluckily, depending on how you looked at it—the others all arrived within minutes of each other. Lottie and Van were first. Van had driven them both, so they walked in together. Shauna hid half-heartedly, lingering toward the back of the house, giving Jackie time to break the news about her presence. She could see their reflections in the large mirror at the end of the long hallway.

They all looked so familiar with each other, so genuinely close in a way that Shauna didn’t quite feel with the women she’d remained in touch with. After hugging each of them, Jackie began trying to explain. Lottie sat down almost immediately, but Van remained standing, unsettled.

Seeing them was a fucking trip. They both looked similar to how Shauna remembered them, much less shocking than Jackie’s appearance had been. Van had significantly more freckles, and her scar was faint, like she might’ve had it surgically repaired. Unlike Jackie, their styles were what Shauna might’ve expected if she tried to guess. Van wore a brown leather jacket over an orange and white striped tee shirt, Lottie had on a long yellow dress with tights and a shawl.

Before Jackie could get very far into any sort of explanation, Nat, Misty, and Tai walked through the door. Shauna hurried out, hitting the living room just in time to watch as jaws hit the floor.

“Wha—” Tai dropped her bag at her feet, just barely inside the door.

“Hoooooly fuck, dude,” Nat said, her mouth hanging open.

Van bounced on the balls of her feet like she was getting ready to sprint. Lottie sank deeper into her chair and picked at her cuticles. Jackie chewed her lip anxiously.

“Well, the more the merrier, I guess!” Misty chirped, slipping past an immobile Nat to set her things down neatly by the sofa. “I’m guessing you two decided to put this together?”

She was clearly speaking to Jackie and Shauna, as they were the only ones standing near the hallway. Van and Lottie were on the far side of the living room, and Nat and Tai remained frozen by the door.

“I might’ve warned people if it were me but, hey,” Misty said brightly, “if anyone has a panic attack I brought my emergency supply kit.”

She sat on the couch and crossed her legs, amused eyes darting between all the shocked faces.

Tai and Van locked eyes for a brief moment, their expressions unreadable. Nat found the wherewithal to shut the door behind her, but she remained stiff, standing with her back pressed to the wall.

“What the fuck, Jackie?” Van snapped, shaking her head so hard her hair swung behind her. Jackie frowned and took a step toward her. Van backed up, rounding on Lottie. “Did you know about this, Lot?”

Lottie stared down at her lap.

“Unbelievable. No, you know what I’m out, fuck this,” Van said, taking a few steps toward the door. ‘And you should really come with me,’ she locked eyes with Jackie. “There is no goddamn way this ends well and you know it.”

“Van…” Lottie fixed her with an exaggerated frown.

Jackie took a tentative step toward Van. Without thinking, Shauna reached out and grabbed her wrist loosely.

“Oh my god, Jack. Not this, not with Shauna,” Van said. Shauna dropped Jackie’s wrist and backed up, doing her best not to glare at Van, trying desperately to keep a straight face. “Since fucking when?”

“I’ve only been… I mean, a few days ago we…” Jackie was flustered, her cheeks pink.

“Oh, this is just fucking fantastic, you went twenty-five years without seeing her? Had twenty-five years to reflect on the bullshit?” Van side-eyed Shauna with unbridled disdain. “And now she’s got you wrapped around her finger again in what? Forty-eight hours? Jackie, she’s fucking insane.”

“Oh, yeah.” Shauna stepped closer to Van, close enough that she could’ve counted the freckles across the bridge of her nose, and felt her hands clench into fists at her sides, “because you’re one to judge sanity, Palmer?”

“Enough!” Jackie yelled. Well, tried to yell, her voice still weak. “Shauna, back off.”

Jackie’s glare was piercing. Shauna narrowed her eyes, but dropped into the chair closest to her. There was no room to argue with Jackie. Not for Shauna, not when her prize for

obeying would be curling up in bed with her for the third night in a row, pressing her fingers to the inside of her wrist as she slept to feel her pulse bound steadily.

"Van, I'm not a fucking idiot. I know who she is. I know what I'm getting myself into." Jackie took Van by the shoulders. "And I know that if you leave right now you are very likely fucked, so can we all please just sit down and talk like fucking humans?"

Jackie spitting out *I know who she is* like it was nothing sent a pang through Shauna's chest. Shauna, in all her cloudy haze, had forgotten that Jackie being in touch with Van and Lottie all this time meant that she probably knew things. Things Shauna would rather she didn't.

"Sorry to interrupt the pissing contest," Nat said, "but I'm still stuck on the fact that the goddamn prom queen over here is… alive? Am I the only one who didn't know about this?"

Nat gaped at Jackie, her head tilted slightly, as though testing the merits of a mirage.

Tai mirrored Nat's shocked expression perfectly. "I definitely didn't know."

"I did." Misty smiled at them proudly.

Jackie rolled her eyes.

Van ignored everyone, her focus solely on Jackie. "Whatever, Jack. This act," she waved in Shauna's direction, "her jumping when you say jump? That shit won't last. She's the same bitch she's always been."

Shauna scoffed and shook her head. Jackie held a hand in her direction to silence her.

"Van, please," Jackie said. "We need to do this, okay? We need everyone. Stay."

Jackie grabbed Van's hand and Van fell silent, allowing Jackie to lead her to the chair next to Lottie, who placed a hand on her shoulder the moment she sat. Van kept herself perched on the edge of her seat, her legs bouncing, clearly ready to bolt at any second.

How in the hell, Shauna wondered as she watched Jackie retreat, had they gotten so close?

"Nat, yeah, I'm alive. Surprise." Jackie held her arms out to her sides half-heartedly, frustration still thick in her voice. 'I'm glad you're okay. I'm sorry you got… taken. Tai.' Jackie nodded once in her direction. Tai nodded back, her eyes still wide. "Is everyone done freaking the fuck out now?"

Jackie shrugged off her jacket and tossed it aside. She was left in a white tank top, her lean, tan arms and a hint of cleavage on display. She was sweating, her hair beginning to form waves at the ends and near her temples. Shauna shifted in her seat and tore her eyes away.

"I don't know, Jackie." Nat chewed on Jackie's name like she wasn't sure she was saying it right. "I sort of feel like these two monopolized our freak out time."

"Right, well… we can still freak out, I guess. I mean, this is freak out worthy. I meant more… is everyone going to be civil now?" Jackie was exasperated. Her hands shook at her sides. "Like, can we all sit down and talk?"

"I don't make promises I can't keep, Cap," Nat said slowly. Other than some scattered bruises on her arms, she didn't have any visible damage. 'But I can try.' Nat clapped a hand

on Jackie's shoulder. "You look good."

Nat had never looked this happy to see Shauna. She and Nat had a tumultuous relationship at best, and part of that had always been Nat's inability to let Shauna's betrayal of Jackie go. It'd never seemed to be about Jackie herself, as much as the principle of the thing, but now Shauna wondered.

Jackie smiled, releasing the tension in her jaw and shoulders, and pulled Nat in for a hug. Nat squeezed Jackie tight for a moment, before falling back into the group. She sat in a chair that still gave her easy visualization of everyone in the room, then glanced at Tai who was gaping at her openly.

"You're telling me you aren't going to stick around for this?" Nat asked. 'Come on, Tai. Aren't you curious?' Nat fished a large metal water bottle out of her purse and took a swig. "I've got to see how this one plays out."

Everyone was sitting, except for Jackie and Tai.

"Taissa." Shauna used the kindest voice she could muster. "I'm sorry, but we needed to do this. You know we did. And I didn't know… how else to get you here."

"How the fuck are you standing here right now?" Tai addressed Jackie, ignoring Shauna completely. "I mean God, *fuck*, I saw you with my own eyes."

Jackie shrugged, ran trembling fingers through her hair.

"Extreme hypothermia," Lottie spoke softly, interjecting for the first time since everyone arrived, "is actually very possible to bounce back from. No matter how far gone you look."

The room whipped around to stare at her. She pulled her legs up onto her chair, curling in on herself.

Tai stepped forward and hugged Jackie hard, her arms snug around Jackie's shoulders. Jackie rubbed a hand across Tai's back, one, two, three soothing circles, before releasing her. Tai sat next to Misty on the couch, her hands folded in her lap, and Jackie was the last woman standing.

"Right." Jackie clapped her hands together in front of her chest. "Let's get started, shall we?"

4. kiss me again

It was uncanny how quickly everyone fell into line, deferring to Jackie. She had the shock factor to account for some of the compliance, sure, but it seemed as though they had been transported immediately to a different lifetime, one where Jackie was their team captain, the only one who could keep them in check. She had been chosen for the role for a reason. Every other woman in the room had been a big personality—had anger issues, or mental health issues, or something else that made them difficult to reign in—since long before the crash. Jackie was the only one who could get through to them as a complete unit.

Van and Nat had abusive, addict parents with a long list of issues. Jackie could relate to that, even if the abuse in her home was shrouded in money and pretense. Lottie's parents were emotionally distant. Jackie's actually went on weeks-long vacations with the Matthews, occasionally. Tai was driven to prove herself by a force so strong it overpowered her desire for happiness. Jackie was her equal in that, throwing away opportunities for joy out of fear of tarnishing her reputation. Even Misty, who'd been cruelly bullied, could find common ground there with Jackie. Though the insults might've been different—Jackie had been called a slut, a prude, a bitch, manipulative—the hate was the same. And Shauna… well, Shauna and Jackie's connection had always gone beyond words.

Jackie's entire identity had been grounded in her ability to walk into any room and connect to the people in it, to make them get along. When they were forced out of society and thrown into the wilderness, she was drained of that power. But here, now, it sure as fuck seemed like she'd gotten it back.

Jackie took a deep breath and… turned on her heel and walked into the kitchen.

What the fuck?

"Uhh," Nat called after her, "sort of felt like you were gearing up for, I don't know, a speech or something there?"

Shauna watched Jackie carefully. She walked with purpose. As quickly as she'd left she was back, her arms laden with bottles of water and wine. She dropped them unceremoniously on the coffee table.

"There's food and stuff in the kitchen," Jackie said. "And glasses for the wine if anyone wants."

She opened a water for herself and downed a third of it in one go. A thin layer of sweat lingered on her skin, and Shauna fought to keep her mind from straying to the well-worn territory of years spent crammed in a seat next to Jackie after games, or watching her strip out of her damp uniform in the locker room, the cardinal urge to feel and smell and taste. Jackie was flushed, paler and pinker than usual, and she looked unsteady on her feet.

Shauna again resisted an urge, this time to stand and wrap her arms around Jackie and hold her upright. She instead eyed Van, who avoided her gaze firmly.

“I don’t know about you guys but I really like being comfortable now,” Jackie said, “and this is an uncomfortable situation as it is, so… help yourself.”

Misty was the first to move. She snagged a bag of grapes and a box of cookies from the counter and tossed them onto the coffee table next to the drinks. She sat more comfortably on the couch this time, her feet tucked underneath her, and pushed her glasses up, looking at Jackie expectantly.

Van reached for two waters, passing one off to Lottie.

“Screw it. Wine anyone?” Tai asked with a sigh. “It isn’t every day an old friend is resurrected.”

“I’m good.” Nat shook her metal water bottle.

“I’ll take some, Tai,” Shauna said.

Maybe a little alcohol would help her relax enough to allow this to be a productive conversation.

Tai came back with her hands full of glasses, the stems trapped between her long fingers. After heavy pours for herself and Shauna, she retook her seat next to Misty.

“Thanks, Jackie.” Lottie smiled encouragingly. “That was really kind of you to consider.”

Shauna watched as Jackie gave her a small smile in return. She still looked in control, but Shauna could tell that she was spiraling beneath the surface. She assumed some of the others could, too, but she wasn’t sure. The focus of Jackie and Shauna’s planning had been entirely centered on convincing everyone to stay in one room together. They hadn’t really discussed what they’d do if they accomplished that. Sparing a quick glance at Van, who was staring down at the floor between her legs, Shauna decided to risk it. She stood and took Jackie’s hand gently, just barely clasping it in her own.

“Do you want to sit, maybe?” Shauna forced herself not to turn and check for a reaction from Van.

Jackie squeezed her hand firmly for a moment. She dropped it just as fast, tossing her hair over her shoulder.

“Yeah,” she whispered. “Yeah I didn’t really… think this far ahead.”

Shauna pulled a chair up behind her, placing it just a few feet from her own. As Shauna sat again, Jackie stared at her, her eyes wide, dropping the mask for just a moment.

“Thank you,” Jackie mouthed.

Shauna smiled, nodded quickly, found herself warming through with the evidence that her encouragement had done far more to soothe Jackie than Lottie’s. When Jackie perched herself in the small, purple chair—something velvet and rigid that Jeff would say was *too out there*—silence fell over the group.

“O—kay.” Jackie flashed her prettiest grin. “So… you guys probably want the basics of how I’m here, right?”

Shauna twitched in her seat. Was Jackie really willing to share this with the group when she hadn't wanted to tell Shauna anything one on one? Jackie seemed to be avoiding her eyes, looking at everyone but Shauna in turn. Tai nodded. Van bit her lip, her legs bouncing in agitation. Lottie raised an eyebrow.

Nat fidgeted with her bottle, turning it over in her hands. "Yeah, Jackie, no shit."

"Right, well… Lottie? Van?" Jackie's eyes flicked between them. "Can I—can I give the basics?"

"Don't see why not," Van said. "This day can't get any crazier."

"From the moment we got back," Lottie clasped her hands loosely and held them out in Jackie's direction, "it was your story to share."

"Whoa, whoa—Van and Lottie? They… they knew?" Tai asked quickly, not sparing a glance in their direction, focusing instead on Jackie. 'And Misty,' Tai turned to her, "you said you knew? And Shauna, you two arranged this whole thing so—" she stared at Shauna, her mouth slightly agape, "so that leaves Nat and I as the only ones in the dark? Why? I don't understand."

Taissa's eyes met Jackie's again, beautiful brown pierced with pain.

"No!" Jackie blurted. "No, Tai, it's more complicated than—"

"Well, I haven't known the *whole* time." Misty shrugged nonchalantly, but her tone was braggy. "I just had an inkling, and then I did a little work with my citizen detective group and got pretty solid confirmation that she was living in Ottawa a while back."

"I—you what?" Jackie snapped, her eyes narrowed. The beauty queen smile was long gone. Things were derailing already. "Citizen detective group? What even—what the fuck, Misty?"

"We don't go looking for Yellowjackets who don't want to be found." Tai was stony, her jaw set. "Especially when it involves *telling* other people."

"I also feel like we don't hide that information from each other when we have it," Nat said. "I mean *shit.*"

Misty scoffed. "Oh, Taissa. That's so funny coming from you." She winked and crossed her arms against her chest.

"Misty," Tai warned, shaking her head almost imperceptibly.

Whatever that was, Shauna would deal with it later.

"Well…" An excited glint flashed in Misty's eyes. "*Were* you in Ottawa, Jackie?"

"I… I don't…" Bright pink splotches broke out on Jackie's chest. She drank a few more sips of her water, stalling.

"Oh my God," Van said suddenly. "I fucking knew it!" She jumped to her feet, her eyes locked on Tai.

"Knew… knew what?" Tai asked.

“That fucking reporter?” Van threw air quotes around the word *reporter.*

Tai chewed on her cheek. She’d done something. Something that was making her stir with guilt. And, though Shauna didn’t want to admit it to herself, she knew exactly what Tai was shifting in her seat about. *Fucking hell, Taissa.*

“That fucking reporter starts skulking around,” Van said, “right around the time *somebody* decides to run for office.”

Misty popped a grape into her mouth and poured herself a glass of wine, her elation so palpable Shauna thought she may raise a toast.

“That’s a coincidence,” Tai said. “She came to see all—”

“And,” Van interrupted, “right after she turned up, somebody tried fucking kill me.”

“Van, what—”

“Hold the fuck—”

“—do you mean killed?”

Van ignored the chorus, locked entirely onto Taissa. “I haven’t heard from any *Yellowjackets crazies* in years. So, both of those things happening at once? Well, that would be one hell of a coincidence.”

Tai stood, her hands on her hips. She took the deep, shaky breaths of an impending fight, and then Shauna watched as she lost it, deflating before she’d even begun. She blinked, her long lashes brushing against her skin. Van raised an eyebrow at her expectantly.

“I wouldn’t,” Tai said. “I wouldn’t… you—you *know* I wouldn’t.”

“You wouldn’t?” Van laughed without any humor. “Could’ve fucking fooled me.”

“Van,” Nat said, “how exactly did someone try to kill you?” She leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, both hands gripping her water bottle and one foot bouncing methodically.

“Madame State Senator over here,” Van spoke more with resigned exhaustion than anger, “had that bullshit reporter come calling, and my brakes were cut a few days later.”

“But… I didn’t.” Tai shook her head, one hand on the small of her back and the other pressed to her forehead.

“Tai.” Misty grinned without any joy. “Let’s at least stop pretending that you didn’t hire Jessica, hmm? It’s getting a bit old.”

Shauna glared between them. She was inclined to believe Van and Misty—at least, she believed that *they* believed what they were saying—but she was much more interested in bringing the conversation back to what Jackie had been poised to share before things had been derailed. Dealing with Tai’s transgressions was low on her list. She could be pissed about them later. But an explanation from Jackie was a door that could swing shut permanently at any moment.

“Son of a bitch.” Nat shook her head, her eyes locked on Tai.

“I had to make sure nothing was going to come out. Nothing that was going to hurt *any* of us.” Tai made good use of her steadiest politician tone, but this audience was unimpressed. “But, Van, I did *not* send anyone to… to threaten you.”

Van closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I know that. I’m not saying that’s what you meant to happen. I’m just saying that it’s probably fucking related. You deal with these shady people, you don’t know what you’re going to get, and—”

“Van.” Misty sat up straighter. She pushed her glasses up gingerly and tilted her head to the side. “When were your brakes cut?”

“Two weeks ago.” Van scrubbed a hand over her face. Tai watched her closely, clearly pained and confused and more desperate than she’d ever admit to feeling. “It took that woman a while to actually catch up to me.”

“Oh, well, that’s great!” Misty swirled the glass of red in her hand. It sloshed up near the rim and whooshed back down, over and over. “Jessica can’t have been the one who cut your brakes, because she was in my basement. Totally iron-clad alibi. I mean, that doesn’t necessarily clear *Tai’s* name, but I’m not really sure she has a good motive to off you, anyway.”

“Your basement?” Jackie’s mouth dropped open, her lips coming together twice before she actually managed to force more words out. “You put this woman in… in your basement?”

“She was onto us,” Misty said, as if it were the simplest thing on earth. “And I was protecting us. Tai made a mistake hiring her. She wasn’t loyal to anyone but herself, and we’re sort of a gold-mine.”

“Misty, you crazy fucking bitch.” Nat threw back a large swig of her drink. Shauna caught a whiff of vodka, strong and cheap.

“Where is she now, Misty?” Tai asked carefully, with the cadence of one suddenly roped into an unexpected debut as a hostage negotiator.

Misty popped another grape into her mouth before answering. “Mmmm, dead somewhere. I had to. Don’t worry, though, it won’t be traced back to us. It won’t even be classified as a homicide.”

Everyone aside from Misty and Shauna rose to their feet. Jackie sprang out of her chair and pitched forward, her hands planted on her knees, assuming the same stance she always had after sprints. Van yanked a pensive looking Lottie out of her chair by the elbow and tried to edge them toward the back door. Nat pinched the bridge of her nose with one hand and started pacing, murmuring under her breath. Tai cursed Misty loudly, her face buried in her hands. It was chaos, everyone talking over one another.

“Guys, come on!” Misty shouted to be heard over the din. “Can we *please* stop acting like one of us killing someone is that weird?”

Jackie dug her nails into her palms so hard Shauna thought she might draw blood.

Out of control. This entire thing was already out of control. Shauna picked up a heavy coffee table book, some tome about modern architecture that looked crisp, like it’d never been opened. She surveyed everyone one more time. They were about to lose Van out the back

door, maybe Lottie with her. Tai was clearly considering an exit out the front. Everything was coming undone, and quickly.

Shauna calmly leaned forward, still seated, and swung her arm up. Air rushed audibly as she brought her arm back down, and a loud *whomp* cracked through the room as she slammed the book flat against the surface of the table.

The entire room turned and froze.

Shauna held the book in one hand, her glass of wine in the other, and met their startled eyes. She gave her order smoothly, each word drawn out: *"Sit. Down."*

Everyone listened.

Everyone, that is, except Jackie. She remained standing, with her palms pressed to her thighs, her brow knitted in confusion, and surveyed each of the women in their seats—Lottie and Tai avoiding Shauna's eyes, Misty smirking, Nat staring Shauna down, annoyed but seated, with her arms crossed against her chest, Van with her head cradled in her hands. Jackie turned back to Shauna, her jaw gone fully slack.

Shauna softened her expression. She let go of the book and leaned back in her chair. "Jax," she said softly. Jackie blinked down at her quickly. "I want to hear what you were going to say earlier. Do you still want to tell us?"

"I… I was… um." Jackie ran her hand through her hair, her sweet doe eyes still locked on Shauna. 'Yeah, okay.' She sank into her chair slowly. "Well, what I was, um, going to say was that I don't want to rehash everything right now. Or… actually ever. We need to focus on the present, on whoever's coming for us. Whoever kidnapped Nat and cut Van's brakes—"

"And killed Travis," Nat interjected firmly. She wrapped her arms around her stomach and curled in on herself.

"Right, *God,* and killed Travis," Jackie said, her confidence growing with every word. "But I'm not naive enough to think that anyone will be able to trust me without at least a little information."

Everyone watched Jackie closely, but eyes continued to flick to Shauna here and there. She could feel them on her.

"So… I'll give you the basics." Jackie exhaled shakily. 'Lottie and Van saved me. They took me to this… bunker they'd found. There was nothing useful there. No one hid any supplies or anything. They warmed me up and… and made sure I survived. I dealt with,' she gulped, "a lot of the same *presences* you all dealt with. I just… did it mostly alone."

Presences was a very diplomatic choice of words. The group had always been in stark disagreement when it came to the cause of the outside disturbances in the woods, some vehemently swearing they'd seen real, living people, some convinced there were spirits interfering with them, and some swearing it was all psychological, purely in their heads. Others still shared a combination of those beliefs, or found themselves convinced of different truths on different days.

Shauna had never been certain what she thought and, to be perfectly honest, her main belief was that it didn't fucking matter.

“I was rescued at the same time as you all. Well shortly after, actually, because I couldn’t… wouldn’t go with you. Not on the same plane. I was too… I don’t know. I just couldn’t do it.” Jackie sniffed and tucked her hair behind her ear. “So… so Lottie sent someone to me separately. Arranged it before you left town so that she could be sure I’d get out and—anyway, the details don’t matter. Someone not, um… government affiliated came for me and then I just sort of… stayed off the grid. I mean, like, not in the wilderness off the grid. I won’t even live outside a major city. Just… just *not Jackie Taylor* off the grid.”

It wasn’t much more than Shauna already knew. The specifics of the bunker and the fact that Jackie experienced the same weird shit they all did hadn’t been explicitly stated between the two of them, but she’d guessed something along those lines must’ve happened.

“But why would you hide from us?” Tai asked quietly, her deep brown eyes focused on the glass of wine she’d yet to take a sip of.

Tai had asked the question that Shauna wanted answered, the one she felt she herself couldn’t ask without alienating Jackie.

“Well… that’s sort of the, uh, more sensitive part, I guess.” Jackie’s hands shook slightly.

Shauna sat on her own hands to avoid reaching for her. She wanted to pull her into her lap, like they had in the motel. She wanted to tell her nevermind. That it was okay. It was okay for them not to talk about this if she didn’t want to, because all Shauna cared about was that she was here now.

Jackie looked to Lottie for help.

“I thought someone would end up killing her,” Lottie said simply. “If she rejoined the group.”

Shauna stared at Jackie, begging for eye contact that Jackie didn’t give.

Everything was spinning out. Shauna felt light, not in the sense of relief way, but in the detached from the earth way. A floaty, surreal, terrifying lightness that she was all too familiar with.

“Pretty much,” Jackie whispered.

Misty looked curious, Nat and Tai shocked, and Van stressed.

Shauna took a shuddering breath, trying to force the tears not to fall. *“Jackie.”* Her name came out of Shauna’s mouth mangled, torn and sharp and painful. It was the only explanation that made any sense, but Shauna hadn’t considered it, hadn’t thought it possible, and now she was being confronted by it publicly. Her head spun. “Y-you believed that? That we would… would kill you? That *I* would… let that happen?”

Jackie finally met Shauna’s eyes. Fresh tears carried streaks of black down her cheeks. She nodded once, bobbing her chin no more than an inch. Shauna covered her mouth and inhaled sharply. Jackie shielded her entire face, resting her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands.

“Can you blame her?” Van finally looked Shauna dead in the eyes, challenging her.

Shauna ignored her. She kept one hand trapped under her thigh and one clasped over her mouth, physically holding herself back. She wanted, in equal parts, to hit Van and to rush to Jackie's side.

"That's… I mean, that's crazy," Tai said.

A beat of silence fell over them. Nat rose and set her water bottle on her chair. She walked to Jackie slowly, clearing her throat, and touched her shoulder with a few tentative fingers. Jackie moved her hands at Nat's touch, glancing up at her.

"I don't think it was crazy." Nat's voice was raspy but warm. Relief flashed in Jackie's eyes, the same way it always had when someone validated her. "I'm not saying it would've… actually happened, but I don't think you were being crazy." Nat knelt next to Jackie, resting her head on the back of the armchair.

Jackie gave a small smile. "Thank you, Natalie."

Nat nodded. Shauna's heart bounded in her chest.

"Well," Misty said, "I think faking your own death is a little crazy. Not sure I could've chosen to hide in a bunker for over a year because I was convinced my friends were going to murder me."

"Friends," Van scoffed, "that's a strong word for what we were."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tai asked sharply.

Nat gave Jackie's shoulder one more squeeze before returning to her seat, removing herself from the fray.

"Look, can we all just cut the crap for a minute? Actually, for more than a minute. Can we cut the crap permanently?" Van was close to yelling, but she didn't quite reach it. She'd never been much of a yeller. Across the field during a game or Lottie's sprawling yard during a party, sure. But not in anger. "When it's just us there's no goddamn reason to pretend like this."

Shauna let her eyes flutter closed. Van was right, as much as it pained her to accept. Pretending was a waste of time, and time was precious now. Time meant something now, because Jackie was alive, and she wanted to go away with Shauna, and Shauna very much wanted to expedite the bullshit they needed to get through before that could happen.

"I second that motion." Nat saluted Van, her hand missing her forehead and brushing her hair. Not just drunk, Shauna realized, but drunk off her ass.

"We were not friends. We were barely *people.* The night that Jackie… almost died—" Van's voice caught in her throat. She and Jackie exchanged a look, something serious and solemn and deep. "—everyone had already turned against her. We were already *in it.* I'm not excusing myself or Lot from this." Lottie nodded her agreement. 'Lottie thought… well, she wasn't sure what was going to happen with Jackie, but we were the only ones out there when we realized she was alive, and we just acted. Because—no listen to me.' Van held a hand out to silence Tai, who'd leaned forward and opened her mouth to speak. "Because everyone turned on her. Can we just be honest here? We were like a… a fucking wolf pack and Jackie

was the injured alpha, or some shit. You can make your own metaphor if you want, but you all know exactly what I mean."

Van's cadence was so familiar. Shauna would've found it comforting, had Van not been hell-fucking-bent on ruining what Shauna had going with Jackie for some reason.

"Someone would've wanted her out of the way. It was a fucking matter of time. She refused to join in on—she just wasn't going to budge. We all knew it. She was tying us to… to how things used to be, and nobody wanted that anymore. Nobody wanted to reckon with who we were becoming. And—" Van shot her hand out again, this time aimed at Misty. "Misty, I swear to God, do not fucking interrupt me right now. I'm only going to do this once."

Misty bristled, but she closed her mouth.

"And everyone just sort of *accepted* that she needed to die. Whatever fucked up logic we were operating under made us all accept that, myself included. Lottie included. We've paid our penance for that," Van locked eyes with Jackie as she said it, before letting her gaze wander among them again, "but when she didn't go that night, when she survived, Lottie and I had a… a… I don't fucking know, a come to Jesus moment, and we realized that if she didn't die naturally, it was going to be brutal. And I just can't sit here and listen to anyone tell her she was crazy for believing that, because God knows it got fucking brutal."

Shauna couldn't stop thinking about something Jackie had said earlier: *I just did it mostly alone.*

Jackie in a stupid bunker. Freezing. Terrified. Starving. Alone.

"Laura Lee wasn't made for that world," Lottie said. "She didn't have enough darkness in her to survive it. Neither did Jackie. It isn't about strength, it's separate from that. We didn't protect Laura Lee. We couldn't save her, but she left this world unmarred by witnessing our… descent. And I think that's how it was meant to be. But… we could protect Jackie. She'd seen the beginning, but she didn't have to stay. And she didn't have to die."

Silence for another long moment.

Shauna fought the overwhelming desire to drop to her knees at Jackie's feet.

"I think," Jackie said carefully, "that who we were out there isn't who we were before. And it's not who we are now. I didn't want to talk about this *because* of that, but I knew nobody would be able to focus without an explanation so… there you go. I want to move on."

Jackie was firm, even in her exhaustion. Her voice was beginning to strengthen but she still dropped a few syllables in each sentence.

"Can we, like, take five?" Nat asked wearily. "I need a fucking smoke after whatever that was."

"Yeah," Jackie said, her distraction evident. Shauna could feel Jackie's eyes on her, but this time she was the one avoiding her gaze. "Yeah, everybody do what you need to do."

Shauna's breaths sped up again, her head spinning faster than ever. She threw herself down the hall and into the bedroom that she and Jackie had claimed earlier. Had she been alone with Jackie, she would've run to her rather than away from her. But letting the other women

see her like that, allowing them a front row seat to her panic, making it crystal fucking clear that she was just as weak and emotional and totally out of control as they'd expect her to be with Jackie back? That wasn't an option.

When Jackie slipped into the room moments later, Shauna let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"Shauna?" Jackie shut the door behind herself gently, the click of it barely audible over the rush of Shauna's blood in her ears. "Are you okay?"

Shauna couldn't respond. She couldn't form words. She was losing herself. Jackie paced back and forth across the light wood flooring, her hands on her hips.

"Shauna, okay, listen. I've made my peace with them because I truly think they were doing what they thought was best and, honestly, I don't think their fears were totally unfounded." The words spilled out of Jackie's lips like water from a burst dam. Shauna still knew Jackie well enough to know that she was losing control, too. Both of them, spinning out. "But I wasn't necessarily an enthusiastic participant in staying hidden. I… it was a little Stockholm Syndrome-y, okay?"

Oh. Shauna truly hadn't considered that, either, felt dumb for not wondering about it sooner.

"I wanted you. I wanted you every day. It fucking consumed me. But… I convinced myself you hated me. That you wanted me dead. Were *happier* with me dead. I get that… that isn't true, now, okay?" Jackie stopped pacing, landed directly in front of Shauna. 'I can see it on your face. But I can't change the past any more than you can. I can't, like, rewrite our history. I just… I spent so long convinced you hated me and I don't want to spend another second feeling that way.' Jackie lifted her arms away from her sides, just enough that Shauna wondered if she was going to reach for her. Sunlight glinted off of her rings. "So… so don't go silent treatment on me again. I've got total PTSD about it. Don't avoid things. Because it makes me think we're going to lose each other all over again. So… just… fucking *say* what you're thinking and stop expecting me to read your mind because—"

Shauna threw her arms around Jackie's neck. Jackie paused for a fraction of a second before wrapping her arms around Shauna's waist.

"Jackie?" Shauna slotted her chin on Jackie's shoulder. Jackie made to pull back and look at her, but Shauna shook her head roughly, the movement of a stubborn child. Jackie rubbed circles low on Shauna's back with one hand, the other creeping up to rest between her shoulder blades. She was lulling Shauna, simmering her down and coaxing the words straight out of her. Shauna whispered her confession against Jackie's neck. "I don't think you understand the way my life revolves around you."

Jackie's hands stilled. Shauna had to push forward with this *honesty* thing. The words kept flowing.

"I saw your *ghost*, Jax. My whole life. Not your ghost, obviously it's not… but I, uh, I guess I hallucinated you." Jackie hadn't moved, hadn't even exhaled. Shauna scrunched her face tight and willed her newfound openness not to backfire. 'From right after I thought you were de— *gone*, until literally an hour before you came to my house. At least a few times a week. Teenage you, because that's the only you I knew. It just… never stopped.' Jackie

turned her cheek and Shauna froze, but warm lips found her temple, pressing two light kisses in a row, and she sank deeper into Jackie's arms. "So… it… it won't be me that… leaves. I don't think I could physically make myself, even if I wanted to."

Shauna kept her eyes closed tight. Her head pounded violently.

"Did I… talk to you?" Jackie asked.

"Did—uh, that's what you got from that?"

"Well, yeah." Jackie slid both of her hands up and down the length of Shauna's back. "I mean, it's like two totally different things. If I just sat there and looked pretty or if you had, like, conversations with me."

"Which is better?" Shauna mumbled into the crook of her neck.

"The truth." Jackie's mouth moved against her hair.

"We talked," Shauna whispered.

Jackie pulled back. Shauna groaned into her skin.

"Shauna," she said gently, "look at me."

Shauna tried shaking her head again, but it didn't work this time. Jackie tugged at a strand of her hair gently until she lifted her head off of her shoulder.

"I still have a tape player," Jackie announced, matter-of-fact.

Shauna narrowed her eyes and let out a cautious laugh. "Wow, what a revelation. Totally the same as my thing."

"Well, I'm not done clearly, if you want to let me finish." Jackie arched her brow and smirked, and it was sixteen and stupid jokes and arguing lazily over what movie to watch. Shauna closed her throat against tears. "But, no. It isn't going to be the same as your thing, because your thing is a little extreme."

Shauna scrunched her face again. Jackie shifted, her palm warm against Shauna's cheek and her fingers wandering into her hair, and Shauna opened her eyes for her.

"I still have a tape player because when I was twenty, I broke into my parents house and took just a couple things. Not enough to be noticed. I had to be really careful about it, because it's like a shrine in there." Jackie rolled her eyes and let her hand wander from Shauna's cheek to the back of her neck. "Which is funny because they didn't give a shit about me when I was alive, and they'd definitely have disowned me when they realized I was a lesbian."

Lesbian. Jackie was a lesbian. Fully, completely, solely attracted to women. She'd never been into Jeff. Never wanted to be with him in that way. Jackie hadn't been in love with Jeff or happy about all the times he'd touched her. But with Shauna… well, Jackie had scraped her teeth along Shauna's neck and ground her hips down on Shauna's thigh and moaned so sweet and pretty when Shauna whimpered against her lips.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“But, anyway,” Jackie rubbed her thumb back and forth just beneath Shauna’s hairline, “I took a tape. It was one we recorded in your room at your mom’s. I wanted to record *Always Be My Baby* from the radio, and you told me it wouldn’t be a good recording because we were tipsy and I wouldn’t shut up, but I set it up anyway.”

Long pulls of whiskey straight from the bottle and Jackie in a tight tee-shirt and her chest pressed against Shauna’s while they rocked back and forth to the music.

“I remember.” Shauna clutched Jackie’s wrist. She couldn’t handle the thought of Jackie taking her hand off of the back of her neck, so she held her steady. Just in case. “And I was right. You *did* talk through it.”

Jackie grinned, her eyes absolutely sparkling. “Yeah,” she laughed, “you were right. *We* talked right through it.”

“I didn’t know you kept that,” Shauna said.

“Mmm,” Jackie hummed. “It has your voice on it. And your laugh. And I’ve moved about twenty times and I’ve changed my name and my identity and gotten rid of everything I owned more often than I care to admit. But I still have a tape player. And I’ve listened to that thing thousands of times over, mmm, twenty-three years?”

Shauna cracked a shy smile and released Jackie’s wrist, wrapping both of her arms tighter around her neck. Jackie brushed the hair out of Shauna’s eyes.

“So no, uh, *ghosts* in the traditional sense.” Jackie’s eyes locked on Shauna’s lips for the briefest of moments, but Shauna caught it. Her heart thudded in her chest in a way it hadn’t in years. “But, my point is that if I thought you were… dead, I’d probably still be talking to you, too.”

“We’re so fucked up,” Shauna whispered.

“Yeah,” Jackie said, “we always were.”

Shauna wanted to kiss her. She wanted to press her lips against Jackie’s and melt into her, but she knew better than to push like that. Not now. Not yet. Shauna kissed Jackie’s forehead instead. She lingered longer than she would’ve with anyone else, and still, when Shauna made to pull away, Jackie leaned forward to force her lips back onto her skin.

Shauna’s heart hammered heavy throughout her entire body—her temples, the arteries on either side of her neck, low in her stomach, between her legs. She shifted her hands to Jackie’s cheeks, forcing her back so that she could get a good look at her. Jackie stared right back, her lips slightly parted. Shauna leaned in slow, giving Jackie time to pull away, but Jackie just closed her pretty eyes and—

The door slammed open, hitting the wall with a loud *thunk*. They jumped apart and turned to find Nat leaning in the doorway, her arms crossed and a smirk on her face. The same exact smirk she’d sported when she’d caught them like this before—eighteen in Mari’s bathroom, Jackie’s legs hooked around Shauna’s hips and her lips on Shauna’s neck. (As far as they knew, Natalie had never told a soul.)

“Listen, guys, I know better than anybody that old habits die hard,” Nat raised her water bottle in a toast, “but I happen to agree with you that this little meeting should be mandatory.

So I thought you might like to know that you're about to lose your audience."

"Shit." Jackie smoothed her hands over her top, ironing out invisible wrinkles. "Thanks, Nat. We're coming."

"Anytime." Nat winked and turned on her heel, leaving the door open behind her.

Leave it to Natalie to fucking ruin Shauna's shot at—

Jackie whipped around to Shauna, grabbing her cheeks so hard it smushed her face, and planted a kiss on her lips so quickly that Shauna almost convinced herself she'd imagined it.

She was still standing there, her eyes shut and her skin on fire, when Jackie grabbed her sleeve and tugged her toward the door.

"We got to go."

"I'll be right back," Jackie said, leaning in so close her lips brushed against Shauna's ear.

Shauna nodded, caught a pathetic whimper in her throat before it could escape. She watched as Jackie headed down the hallway, toward the cluster of bedrooms and bathrooms, and forced herself not to follow. She refocused on getting the frozen pizza in her hands into the oven, because even though she was letting her guard down considerably more than she could've anticipated, there was no way in hell she wanted to see what could happen in this room if they were all drunk with no food in their systems.

By some miracle, they'd convinced everyone to spend the night at the house. It hadn't taken much, in the end. Especially once the wine had started flowing freely. They'd all tucked their things into rooms, a show of good faith—Jackie had been right, Van and Lottie had doubled up and everyone else had taken their own room. Van had scoffed when she'd seen that Shauna and Jackie were sharing a bed, and Jackie had rolled her eyes, and Shauna had bit her tongue.

They were acting like teenagers again, tired and done with the heavy topics, falling easily into old patterns. Pretending like everything was fine seemed to be everyone's approach. They all knew the merit of fake it 'til you make it—interviews with cops and reporters and psychiatrists had conditioned them well.

Shauna couldn't help but loosen up, laughing with Tai, even making conversation with Lottie when she wasn't hovering near Van. But, though she'd spent the entire night close to Jackie, they were less physical than they'd been when they were alone. Every time Jackie brushed against her—hair against her neck or hands against her arm or chest against her side—Shauna held her breath.

Shauna set the oven timer and wandered back into the living room. Jackie reappeared just minutes later, shoulder-to-shoulder with Nat, the two of them all laughter and smiles. Nat headed straight for the kitchen, where she poured herself a generous glass of wine. Jackie walked directly to Shauna—more like sauntered actually, her hips swinging a little bit more than usual—and pulled her phone out. By the time she reached Shauna, she had a light, upbeat song playing from the small speaker. She laid a hand on Shauna's chest, and suddenly the effects of the wine were multiplied tenfold.

“Hi,” Jackie said. They were very nearly the same height; Shauna had barely an inch on her, if that. But, somehow, Jackie had always managed to bend the laws of physics to her will, angling herself in a way that allowed her to look up at Shauna through long, fluttering lashes when she wanted to.

Jackie swayed side-to-side gently, an adorable smirk fixed on her perfect face. Her eyes were wide, the black of her pupils eclipsing more hazel than they usually did. Jackie slid her hand up and placed it behind Shauna’s neck, in her most overt show of public affection yet. Shauna’s body warmed. She raised an eyebrow, trying to slow the sheepish grin spreading across her face. It was such a wonderfully familiar interaction, even if it’d been a long time since they’d had it.

“Oh, lord,” Tai said, loud enough for them to hear, but quiet enough to pretend she hadn’t wanted them to. “Here we go.”

She was slumped comfortably on the couch with Lottie and, between the slouch of her shoulders and her grin, it was clear that the wine had loosened something in her, too. Tai’s eyes flicked from Jackie to Nat, who was now humming, off-key and off-beat, to the quiet music. Shauna placed a hand on Jackie’s waist without giving it any thought. Jackie slid her arm further down Shauna’s body, gripping her elbow tight.

“Huh?” Shauna muttered absentmindedly, her eyes still locked on Jackie.

Tai giggled, the way she only did when she was tipsy. “They’re *rolling.”*

Jackie and Nat snapped to look at each other. Nat twisted her bottom lip between her teeth, stretching it comically, and Jackie held her breath, her cheeks puffing out—piss poor attempts at straight faces. Jackie broke first, laughing and scrunching her nose, and Nat soon followed.

Jackie turned back to Shauna, still clutching her elbow in a vice-like grip, and hummed again. She traced a finger down Shauna’s cheek. “Don’t be mad,” she murmured, fixing her lips in a little pout.

More heat flooded Shauna. “I’m not mad,” she said.

“Good.” Jackie’s pout was replaced by a bright smile. ‘Hand me that cup will you?’ Jackie reached behind Shauna’s back to make a feeble attempt at grabbing it herself. Shauna turned to pick up the empty glass for Jackie. When she spun back around, Jackie squealed. She planted a kiss on Shauna’s cheek and, instead of taking the cup from her like Shauna had expected, she plopped her phone into it. “There, that’s better.” The music was amplified, loud enough to travel through the entire living room. “You can put it down now,” Jackie said, tossing her arms around Shauna’s neck.

Shauna complied, setting the makeshift speaker down behind her back blindly. Jackie played with her hair, tangling her fingers through it. Shauna downed the rest of her drink in one go—a lot harder with pinot than it was with fucking Malibu, she thought fleetingly—and abandoned her empty glass to free up her hands, so that she could wrap both of her arms around Jackie’s waist and draw her even closer.

“I see nothing’s changed on that front,” Nat said. “Get some alcohol in these two, and I swear—” Lottie delivered a swift elbow to her ribs, and she quieted.

Shauna was properly drunk, focused solely on the feel of Jackie in her arms. She tuned out the chatter of the other women in the background. After a few minutes of swaying together, Shauna's fingers wandering across Jackie's back, Jackie whispered in her ear. *"Come with me."*

Shauna swallowed hard. Jackie broke their embrace. She grabbed Shauna's hand and oh, God, it was happening.

They'd done this so many times in their lives, but Shauna hadn't dared to hope it would happen again. *This.* This was what Shauna had been searching for when she'd gone out with Adam, acting a fool in the liquor store parking lot. He never could've fully delivered, of course, but he was the closest she'd gotten to *this.*

The others were busy talking, getting along much better with the assistance of alcohol. Misty had Van cornered in the kitchen. Lottie, Nat, and Tai laughed together in the living room. Jackie winked at Shauna and turned on her heel, tugging Shauna down the hall behind her. Shauna's heart beat wildly against her ribs as she followed.

The moment Jackie stepped into the bathroom, she yanked Shauna hard. She pulled her so close, so fast, that they crashed together and ricocheted, bouncing off one another before drawing close again, gentler this time, slightly more controlled. Shauna's brain was on override, her body calling the shots. She quietly shut and locked the door behind them. Jackie wrapped her arms tighter around Shauna's neck.

Shauna was shoved back against the door, the handle digging in above her hip, but she couldn't have possibly cared less, because Jackie was kissing her. *Really* kissing her, this time. Shauna snaked her arms around Jackie—lower than when they'd danced, circling her hips and pulling them flush against her own, just like she had back then.

Shauna couldn't help but smile a little into the kiss—shock and relief and gratitude coursing through her, sending electricity down her spine. Jackie bit at Shauna's lower lip, soothing the sting with her tongue, and Shauna groaned. The tone of the kiss changed the instant the sound left her, unbidden and irretractable. Shauna opened her mouth for Jackie, and what had started out sweet and slow morphed into something frantic and rough, as though they could outrun the chase of reality with enough eagerness. They clung to each other, both trying to prevent the other from breaking the kiss. This too was familiar—the feverish switch to clashing tongues and teeth. They couldn't get more of each other fast enough.

Back then, it'd been when they'd heard a friend calling one of their names, when someone had pounded on the bathroom door yelling about needing to pee, when they'd both known that the time Jeff had agreed to drive them home was coming close. Now, it was the crushing weight of everything between them—betrayal and guilt and pain—mingling with the fact that they had lives and responsibilities that didn't typically allow for making out with your childhood best friend in the bathroom.

Shauna broke the kiss, but she couldn't bring herself to pull away from Jackie completely. "You're fucked up, Jax," she mumbled against Jackie's lips.

Jackie panted into her mouth. Shauna rubbed slow circles on Jackie's hips, waiting for a response.

“Mmm.” Jackie moved, neat fitful at the distraction, to trail kisses down Shauna’s jaw. “So are you.”

“Yeah,” Shauna successfully bit back a groan, but she couldn’t avoid the dull thunk of her head falling back against the door, opening more of herself up to Jackie, “but not as much as you are.”

“Don’t care,” Jackie said, against Shauna’s neck. She sucked on the skin just below Shauna’s ear hard enough to leave a bruise.

“Fuck, Jackie,” Shauna moaned.

Jackie pulled back at the sound, and Shauna held her breath. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* But Jackie just smiled conspiratorially and kissed Shauna again, a little softer than before.

It was perfect. Jackie was perfect. They were perfect—here together, just like this. Shauna had done her part. She’d raised just enough doubt. She was more than ready to allow alcohol and pleasure to take over. She guided Jackie backwards until she bumped into the sink. Jackie reached behind herself, placing a steadying hand on the counter. Shauna kissed her urgently, pushing Jackie with her lips hard enough to force her to arch back over the sink.

This time, it was Shauna who hummed happily. She let her hands wander boldly, slipping down to Jackie’s ass. She made to lift her up, but Jackie pulled back, breaking their kiss with a smacking sound. It was too far. Too much, too fast. Of course it was. Shauna brought her hands back up somewhere safer, gentle on Jackie’s hips, and opened her mouth to apologize.

But Jackie didn’t look like she’d been offended by Shauna’s wandering hands. She was amused, giggling under her breath. Jackie brushed the hair out of Shauna’s face and leaned forward, pressing her forehead to Shauna’s. “There’s no way you can lift me like that anymore.”

Shauna let out a relieved little chuckle. She kissed Jackie swiftly on the lips, slipping her hands back down to her ass. Jackie sighed appreciatively, as Shauna’s fingers squeezed.

“Want to bet?” Shauna challenged, grinning.

Jackie squeaked as Shauna lifted her up. Shauna set her on the counter and planted her hands on either side of her hips, smiling at her in triumph.

Jackie automatically parted her thighs, making room for Shauna between them. “I stand corrected.”

She fisted the front of Shauna’s shirt, pulling her in for another bruising kiss. Her hands roamed. She settled, eventually—one hand tangled in Shauna’s hair, the other slipping beneath her shirt to place fingers on her bare back. Shauna gripped Jackie’s hip to steady them both, and let her free hand slide up and down Jackie’s thigh, squeezing as she pleased. She pulled her mouth away from Jackie’s and worked her way down her throat. Jackie gave quiet little whimpers, egging her on. Wetness pooled between Shauna’s thighs, and she shifted her weight to soothe the ache.

She moved lower slowly, slipping a strap of Jackie’s tank top off of her shoulder to gain better access to the crook of her neck. Jackie’s nails scratched at her lower back, and the slight sting made Shauna throb. Jackie’s head dropped back, her chin to the ceiling, and

Shauna took the opportunity to trail gentle kisses down, starting along her collarbone and moving lower, lower, lower—sliding her shirt down further, further, further, until her bra was exposed.

"Shauna," Jackie said, suddenly serious.

Shauna pulled her lips away reluctantly, but kept her forehead and her nose pressed exactly where they were, snug against Jackie's breastbone.

"Hmm?" Shauna closed her eyes tight, dreading Jackie's answer.

She must've sounded as reluctant as she felt, because Jackie sighed beneath her, her breasts rising enough to graze Shauna's chin. *Fuck.* Jackie played with Shauna's hair and rubbed a hand lightly up and down her spine.

"We need to stop." Jackie managed to sound both tender and firm.

Shauna sighed and inched her face up, pressing her forehead to Jackie's shoulder instead. She didn't want to meet her eyes, couldn't bring herself to look into them. They were both breathing jagged, heavy breaths, and Shauna didn't think she could take the expression that—if experience counted for anything, and it was starting to become clear that it counted for a lot—she knew Jackie would be wearing right now. Heavy lids, slow blinks, parted lips. *God fucking damnit.*

"Why?" Shauna asked, so quiet it would've been easy to ignore.

Jackie didn't ignore it. Her hands stilled. "Because, Shauna, you're married."

A cold chill washed over Shauna. She pulled back. Where she'd expected Jackie to look visibly pissed, all she found were the trappings of heartbreak. The guilt Shauna felt was sharp, but it wasn't guilt for cheating on Jeff. Of course it wasn't. It was guilt for making Jackie feel like this. Jackie chewed on her lip, her eyes glassy. Shauna couldn't handle watching her cry.

Rather than simply apologizing—or telling Jackie what she was thinking, or anything else remotely helpful—Shauna, seemingly without control of her own mouth, out of deeply ingrained habit, snapped at her. "Because *I'm* married? That live-in girlfriend of yours isn't that serious, then?"

Jackie took her hands off of Shauna as though burned, dropping them at her sides. Tears shone in the corners of her eyes, and her bottom lip trembled. "Don't be mean to me," she said, her voice impossibly small. "It's not my *fault."*

Shauna squeezed her eyes shut tight, suddenly unable to look at her, to handle that she was real, that she was here, that she was crying because of Shauna. When she opened them, Jackie was chewing on her kiss-swollen lip.

"I'm sorry, Jax," Shauna said. "I—I didn't mean that. Please?"

Jackie didn't speak, only nodded, as she allowed Shauna to grip the safe territory of her waist and help lift her off of the counter gently. Despite her better judgment, Shauna pushed further, hugging Jackie carefully, with arms looser than felt right for them.

"Forgive me?" she asked, tucking her chin over Jackie's shoulder.

Jackie's arms settled around her, and she whispered in that strained, rasping voice of hers, "Yes."

When everyone finally retreated, the surreal atmosphere of the night dwindling down to sputtering exhaustion, a sudden shared urge to seek refuge in their rooms for the night, Shauna had one thing on her mind.

Well, a few things, really. The first order of business was to lock the bedroom door and prop a chair beneath the handle for good measure. As much as Shauna *wanted* to trust these women, she knew she wouldn't sleep a wink without a barrier, just as she knew that there was no way she was the only one doing something of the sort that night.

The second was Jackie, of course. Jackie, who was looking so goddamn beautiful—coming down from her high, shuffling through Shauna's bag to find a T-shirt to sleep in without bothering to ask permission, just as she'd shuffled through Shauna's dresser in high school, not only wearing Shauna's clothes to bed when she stayed at her house, but sneaking band tees and flannels into her backpack to smuggle home. (Once a month, when Shauna would start to feel the impact of sharing her closet, she'd sneak them back. She'd always leave at least one shirt behind, though, because the thought of Jackie sleeping in her clothes… that had always done something for her. It'd boosted Shauna's ego immeasurably to know that, instead of sneaking Jeff's cologne-drenched shirts home, Jackie swiped the tees that *Shauna* had worn recently, often taking them directly from her dirty laundry.)

So, watching Jackie boldly dig through Shauna's bag after she'd pushed her up against the wall a few hours prior… that was also very much something on Shauna's mind.

But Shauna had to reckon with the fact that she had a more pressing problem. After Misty's easy confession about Jessica, she was certain one of the truths coming out was going to be Adam. She had to be the one to tell Jackie, before Misty got to it. Or Tai or Nat, for that matter. If they broke the news, the whole *radical honesty* method she was trying with Jackie was going to be rendered useless.

Breaking the news about her ghostly version of Jackie had gone alright—well, even—and that'd surprised her. But this… Shauna just didn't know if she could convince Jackie to accept this. So, there Shauna was, watching the woman she was still so desperately in love with—obsessed with, really—step out of the bathroom in her own dumb, oversized shirt, trying to figure out how to tell her that she'd stabbed her boyfriend.

Shauna studied Jackie, attempting to memorize every detail of her, just in case it was the last time she'd get to look at her. The old Shauna would've hidden the Adam secret for as long as she could. She'd have threatened the other women into keeping quiet if she had to, postponing the inevitable as long as possible. But Shauna had learned her lesson about keeping things from Jackie.

Jackie could tell something was going on with her. She stood frozen in the doorway of the ensuite bathroom. Her hair was up, piled loosely into a bun with a scrunchie— *you can't sleep in normal hair ties, Shauna, they'll pull your hair out.* Her face was bare, her pupils considerably less blown. There was a thin sheen of moisturizer on her face. The balm she'd put on her lips, combined with the way Shauna had pulled them between her teeth a few

hours ago, made them look even fuller than usual. Shauna's sleep shirt was plain and navy—gone were the days of band tees—and it fell just past the tops of Jackie's toned thighs. She wore shorts so small Shauna could barely see them sticking out. She'd taken off all of her rings but one, a gold band with a single opal that Shauna recognized from their childhood.

"Hey," Jackie said, breaking Shauna from what had felt like a trance. "You're, um—you're really *looking* at me, and I know you said that's a thing for you right now which, trust me, I've been looking at you a lot too, but you look… sad, and I feel a little bit stuck with how intense this is, and I… kind of want to lay down with you."

Shauna shook her head, desperate to clear it. "I'm sorry." She ran a hand over her eyes. "I… of course, come lay down. I'm sorry, I didn't mean…" Shauna trailed off as Jackie climbed into the bed next to her.

They faced each other, Shauna cross-legged and Jackie with her knees bent and legs tucked beneath her.

"Hi." Shauna brushed a strand of Jackie's hair behind her ear.

"Hey." Jackie offered a shy smile.

"Are you still high?" Shauna asked, pulling her hands back into her lap and picked at her cuticles.

"Mmm, I don't think so." Jackie shrugged. "I mean, I wouldn't go, like, drive a car or operate heavy machinery right now, but I feel pretty sober."

Shauna cracked a smile, noting the way Jackie's nose scrunched when she joked. *Something to remember.*

"Are you still drunk?" Jackie asked.

"Eh, same as you," Shauna said.

Jackie nodded, studying Shauna intently.

"Can I kiss you?" Shauna asked. She hadn't known the words were going to come out of her mouth until they were already hanging in the air between them, her lips loose and her brain clouded by the need to kiss Jackie one last time.

Jackie raised an eyebrow, her eyes still roaming Shauna's face. "You've never asked me that before."

"Really?" Shauna swallowed hard.

"Really." Jackie cupped Shauna's jaw, ran her thumb across her lips. "You always just did it."

"Mmm," Shauna hummed. "I never noticed."

Jackie slid her hand to the back of Shauna's neck and leaned forward until she was nudging Shauna's nose with her own. "I thought you wanted to kiss me," she whispered.

"You didn't answer," Shauna said. Her hands found Jackie's knees and she held tight, bracing herself. She parted her lips, tilting her head so that they were barely a hair apart, but

she didn't kiss her. She waited.

Jackie brought her other hand up to clutch Shauna's cheek, her nails scratching at Shauna's scalp. She took a shaky breath in, and her lips brushed Shauna's as she parted them to speak. "Kiss me."

Shauna did.

It wasn't rough like it'd been earlier, nor was it sweet and playful. Shauna tried to put every ounce of her feelings for Jackie into the kiss—slow and serious and determined.

Jackie sat up on her knees, holding Shauna's face firmly to hers, and inched forward until she could sit in her lap. She sank down, her legs straddling Shauna's hips, but it didn't feel urgent or innately sexual the way their last kiss had. It felt as though they were simply trying to get as close to each other as possible, to melt into one.

They kissed until Shauna tasted salt on her lips. She had to pull away to check whether they were her tears or Jackie's. Jackie was crying silently, and she tried desperately to reconnect their lips. Shauna let her, for just a moment, before breaking the kiss and closing gentle fingers around Jackie's wrists. Jackie was still cradling Shauna's head between her hands. She tried to lean in again, but Shauna pulled back.

"You're crying." Shauna rubbed her thumbs across the bones in Jackie's wrists slowly. She struggled, even now, with how sharp they felt, and had to make the conscious effort to remind herself that they were in a real town, with people and cars, with access to twenty-four hour diners and grocery stores, with food in the pantry and food in Jackie's stomach. Safe and healthy and whole. Jackie slid her hands lower, resting them on Shauna's shoulders, and Shauna shifted to her waist. "Why are you crying, Jax?"

"Why—" Jackie hiccuped. "Why are you saying goodbye?"

And, *God,* Shauna had communicated the wrong thing. Instead of pouring her undying love into this kiss, her fears that it would be their last had shone through.

"No, no, no." Shauna ran her hands up and down Jackie's back, motions that she meant to be soothing but seemed to come out frantic. "I'm not—that isn't what—" *Fuck,* she'd done it now. Jackie slid off of Shauna's lap, but she stayed close enough that their knees touched. "I'm not saying goodbye."

"Sure felt like it," Jackie said. "You've never kissed me like… like that. That was…"

"Fuck, I'm sorry." Shauna took Jackie's hands in her own, pulling them into her lap. "Jackie, I'm an idiot. I wasn't trying to say goodbye, okay? I promise. I meant what I said earlier, I—I'll never walk away from you. I was just trying to make you understand how I…" *How I feel about you. How I love you. How I want you.* "I've got to tell you something, okay? And I was scared you'd want to be done with me after I told you and I just… I wanted to kiss you one more time. Just in case."

"Why are you—" Jackie hiccupped again, and Shauna tried to burn the image of the little bob of her head that came with it into her memory, "—talking like this? Scared about what?"

Jackie slid one hand out of Shauna's grasp to wipe the tears off of her cheeks. Shauna clung harder to the other.

“I did something really… fucked up recently, and I want to tell you before it comes up with the group. But… I think I need to tell you something else first because the last time I should’ve—well, I should have told you this so fucking long ago, and you might already know but—” Shauna cut herself off. She was rambling, growing less eloquent with each word. She needed to breathe. To think before she spoke. But how the fuck was she supposed to say it eloquently? *I love you and I killed a man?* She took a deep breath. “Sorry.”

She tried to focus on all the times she’d imagined telling Jackie how she felt about her. Thought about how she’d written it on the last page of her journal out there. Scribbled it over and over, her imaginary proclamation. Eventually it’d been all pigment, the words traced and rewritten so many times the page was simply black, the weight of the ink causing the paper to tear and warp. She’d had the conversation with her ghost Jackie a million times. She’d dreamed about it and cried about it and fucking tortured herself about it. She’d stood in Jackie’s childhood bedroom and sobbed it into Jackie’s pillow.

She could worry about the rest later. All that mattered was finally saying it to the real, living, breathing Jackie.

“Can I… okay, can I start over?” Tears betrayed Shauna, forging hot tracks down her cheeks. Jackie brushed them away for her.

“I think you’re going to have to.” Jackie smiled encouragingly and took her other hand again. “Because I really didn’t follow all of that.”

“I’m sorry, I’ve just—fuck—” Shauna sobbed. “I never thought I’d actually get to do this.”

“Take your time,” Jackie soothed. “It’s okay.”

Shauna cleared her throat. “You might already know this but… I owe you the actual words and I wasted every chance you ever gave me because I was a fucking coward,” Shauna said. ‘And it’s probably too soon for me to say this to you now. Too soon when we’ve only spent a few days together, I mean, but… in the big picture it’s way too fucking late.’ Jackie nodded impatiently, urging Shauna on. “Jackie… I was in love with you.”

Jackie’s eyes narrowed, and she chewed on her lip.

“*Am,*” Shauna amended. “I… I *am* in love with you. I know maybe that seems completely fucking crazy to say after all this time but I never… fell out of love with you. I just… *kept* loving you. I’ve been in love with you for as long as I can remember and instead of telling you, I blew it all up. I’ll always be so fucking sorry for that.”

Jackie watched her carefully. Clearly she was not going to speak until she was certain that Shauna was completely done, wasn’t going to give Shauna direction.

“What I should’ve told you was that… you were right. I didn’t like him. Didn’t… didn’t care about Jeff, at all. I should’ve told you that the only reason I fucked him, the only reason I betrayed you like that, was that *he* was allowed to touch you in front of everyone. *He* got to call you his girlfriend, and kiss you whenever he wanted and it… it made me crazy. I was so—so jealous I couldn’t think straight. All I wanted to do was rip him off of you.” Shauna took a deep breath, willing her heart to slow on its race. “So, when he came onto me the first time, I—all I could think about was how I was never going to have you like he did. And here was someone, wanting me, and… he smelled like your perfume and he tasted like your lip gloss

and, if I pretended hard enough, I could—it was like *you* were touching me. That's why. That's why I did it. The only reason why."

Shauna closed her eyes, as though not seeing Jackie's reaction may somehow spare her from it.

"Shauna, love, I… I know."

Shauna's eyes flew open. Jackie's head was tilted to the side. One corner of her mouth was turned up just a bit, the smallest glimpse of a smile.

"You know?" Shauna repeated.

"I mean, I definitely didn't know *then.* I wish you'd told me this then," Jackie said. "And… of course I've sort of wondered how the *Jeff thing* morphed because, well, you *married* him."

Shauna hid her shame by studying the movement of Jackie's fingers against her hands.

"I, um… I wouldn't have guessed that you *still* loved me," Jackie said, shy with a measure of what Shauna thought might be hope. 'But, yeah… with years to reflect and a properly developed frontal lobe, I figured it might've been something like that.' Shauna felt a tear fall onto her hand. She hadn't realized she was crying. "I was, too." Jackie crooked a finger under Shauna's jaw and lifted her chin. "You know that, right?"

"I—I—" Shauna choked on tears and shook her head. "I didn't. Not really."

"*Am*, too." Jackie let her fingers trail through Shauna's hair. "I… still love you."

Shauna buried her face in her hands and leaned forward, unable to form a single coherent thought, at least not one she could trust herself to voice. Jackie wrapped her in a hug, rubbing wide circles on her back.

"I'm sorry, it's just…" Jackie laughed, but Shauna could hear the tears in her voice. "I was just in your lap crying, because you *kissed me too good.* Of course I do."

Shauna felt the sheepish smile being pulled out of her. They sat in silence for a moment—Jackie's hands resting on Shauna's shoulders, Shauna tracing shapes on Jackie's knees.

"Why didn't you say anything back then?" Shauna asked, quietly.

"I mean…" Jackie chuckled. "Because it was the nineties?"

"Seriously," Shauna said. "Please."

Jackie sighed. "I wore your clothes to bed." She trailed lower, squeezed Shauna's biceps. 'I sprayed your fucking perfume on my sheets whenever we got ready to go out at my place. Do you remember that?' Shauna bit her lip and nodded. Jackie slid her hands down to her forearms. "I… made out with you every time the slightest bit of alcohol entered my system. I never once came when Jeff actually touched me. I told you I didn't. And I'd fucking… fucking orgasm from grinding on your lap, Shauna." Jackie blushed as she ran her fingers up and down Shauna's arms lightly. Shauna inhaled, sharp and sudden, at the chill it sent through her. "I cuddled you every night we spent together. I read the stupid AP English books you

liked so you could talk about them to me, even though I hated them and, by the way, still think most of them are overrated male ramblings."

Shauna raised a brow and chuckled. "You read them?"

"Fine. Skimmed them, same difference," Jackie said, rolling her eyes with a grin. "I told you how pretty you were, and I looked at you like you hung the moon and the stars, and I tried to do things that made you happy, and I worshipped the fucking ground you walked on. So, no, I didn't say it either. But… I don't know what else I could've done to show you how I felt about you. I've always loved you."

Jackie's gaze slid to her lap, where she placed her hands suddenly. The mood in the room darkened with her movement. Shauna's heart sank.

"Jax?" Shauna reached for Jackie's hands. Jackie moved them too quickly for Shauna to intercept, though, her elbows on her knees and her forehead resting in her palms.

"It's all so fucked, Shauna." Jackie shook her head slowly. "This is—we—you're married and I'm…"

"Oh," Shauna said. "Jackie, I… I didn't expect you to, um, drop—to break up with—I… fuck."

When Jackie looked up again, her eyes were red-rimmed, brimming with tears. "I have to break up with her. No matter what happens or… or doesn't happen with us. I can't—this isn't fair to her."

"Do you love her?" Shauna kept her tone even, though her chest was tight and pained.

"I—well, yeah. I do. She's a good person. She's good to me," Jackie said. "But I don't… not enough to—to stop loving you."

It felt as though someone had dumped ice cold water down Shauna's neck. Of course Jackie loved her girlfriend. Jackie wasn't the type to lie to someone like that. Her relationship with Jeff had been different—a teenager afraid to come out didn't count as a lie. But Jackie wouldn't live with a woman, share a bed with her, tell her that she loved her, without *meaning* it. Jackie *had* loved again. Jackie *could* love again. She could love someone who wasn't Shauna. She deserved someone so much fucking better than Shauna.

"The note I was writing… I was going to end it," Jackie explained. 'I knew from the moment I saw your reaction that I wasn't going to be able to—I was going to end it then. But she got home early and I panicked.' Ending it with a note was something that Shauna hadn't expected from Jackie. Not good, kind Jackie. That was a Shauna move. "I mean, that's crazy right?" Jackie laughed and cried in equal measure. "You're married to my… ex-boyfriend and you have a kid with him and a life with him and I saw you for, like, an hour and I hugged you once and I immediately decided to leave my girlfriend? Who does that?"

"We do," Shauna said. "I would, I mean. If you wanted me to run away with you. If you hadn't been kidding, I would've gone. Would've left him immediately. Without a single thought. That's worse." Shauna didn't mention that she also would've left Callie. She thought Jackie would have some choice words about that piece.

"You had to tell me something bad, right?" Jackie asked. "This whole thing was because you had to tell me something else?"

"Yeah." Shauna ran a hand through her hair. "Okay, will you try not to freak out right away? Like… this is a very bad thing and I know that, but I… fuck, I love you so much and I want to try and explain it, but I know I'm not going to do a good job of it so just… can you try and give me some time?"

"Yes," Jackie said.

"Yeah? Because I think it's going to sound way worse than it is at first. Not that it isn't awful, but I think context will help, and—"

"Shauna, enough disclaimers," Jackie said sternly. "You're married to my ex, who you cheated with, and I know, like, at least half the things you did out there, and I'm sitting in bed with you right now crying about how much I love you. Just tell me."

Shauna ignored the legitimate heart palpitation she felt just after Jackie said *'the things you did out there.'* She could wonder about that later. It was now or never.

"Okay, okay. Last week I killed a man," Shauna spat out, leaning away from Jackie, giving her space to panic.

Jackie opened her mouth. Shut it. Opened it again. Raised both eyebrows as high as they could go. "Okay, and?" she demanded. "You're going to have to give me more information than that!"

"I thought he was blackmailing us. Obviously it… turned out to be Jeff. But when I… stabbed him." Jackie winced at the word stabbed. Shauna scrunched her face. "I thought it was him and I just… well, I think I went into a sort of fugue state? I don't know, but I found all sorts of Yellowjackets shit in his apartment, and I was alone with him and I… guess I just panicked and acted on impulse."

She'd done an okay job spinning that, though maybe she shouldn't have admitted that her impulse was to stab people.

"Why would you go to his apartment alone?" Jackie asked. Confusion showed on her face, but no fear.

Shauna could work with confusion. She could fix that. "There's… another piece," she admitted quietly. Jackie nodded sharply, her eyebrows still raised, prompting her to get a move on. "I was sort of… seeing him."

"Seeing him?" Jackie repeated.

"Yeah, like, you know… *sleeping with him,"* Shauna whispered the final words, as though that may soften the blow.

"Uh huh, I'm not an idiot, I know what *seeing him* means, Shauna!" Jackie whisper-yelled. "I *meant* to suggest that it's a little different if you stabbed the man you were cheating on your husband with, than if you panic-killed someone trying to hurt you!"

"I still did think that he was the one blackmailing us," Shauna said. "I didn't find out that he wasn't until I… told Jeff what I'd done and he confessed to the whole thing."

Jackie blinked at her rapidly. “So…” she pressed the back of her hand to her forehead, as if checking her temperature. “So, let me get this straight, you—you’re telling me that last week you killed your boyfriend, because you thought he was blackmailing you, but turns out it was your husband?”

“Mmm… yeah,” Shauna said. “Pretty much.”

“Well, fuck.” Jackie looked like she’d just been knocked upside the head. But, still, she didn’t look scared. Didn’t look like she was going to jump and run. It was going to be okay. Shauna waited quietly. ‘Okay,’ Jackie took a deep, centering breath, “is that the whole thing? No more little details you’re going to hit me with?”

“Uhhh…”

“Jesus Christ, Shauna, out with it!”

“When I told Jeff, we had to figure out what to do about it… about the, you know, *body,”* Shauna whispered again, as if that alone could reframe how drastic the situation was. “He was going to say he did it. Turn himself in. But I told him that’d hurt us even more with all the Yellowjackets shit.”

“God,” Jackie groaned. “That man really is ride or die for you in the weirdest ways.”

“No idea why,” Shauna said passively. “I think it’s guilt. We never would’ve stayed together, otherwise. I’m not just saying that. We’ve—well, he knows I don’t feel strongly about him.”

Jackie rested her palms on Shauna’s calves gently. “Let’s do that conversation another night, please.”

Shauna was getting another night with her.

“Right. Yeah,” Shauna said. “So, we had to figure it out, and he suggested I tell the others that this man was the one blackmailing us… tell them everything exactly how it happened but… skip the part where I found out it was Jeff. They—Misty and Nat and Tai—helped me clean everything up. Misty got rid of the body.”

Jackie tipped her head back. She blew air through pursed lips, then met Shauna’s eyes again. “That’s the whole thing, yeah?”

“That’s the whole thing.”

“Shauna?”

“Yeah?”

“Next time you tell me how in love with me you are—” Jackie squeezed her calves tight. Shauna felt her cheeks flush. “—it better not be followed by a murder confession. A girl can only handle so much in one sitting.”

Shauna covered Jackie’s hands with her own. “I promise that’s my only murder confession.”

“Good,” Jackie sighed.

“That’s it?” Shauna frowned in disbelief. “That’s your whole reaction?”

“For tonight, yeah. I think that’s it. What, do you want me to act surprised?” Jackie slid her hands closer to Shauna’s knees. “I’m not. It doesn’t surprise me that you killed a man you felt threatened by. Like, I can’t tell you how little that surprises me. I’m honestly more surprised that you had a boyfriend.”

“Oh… I guess that’s—” Shauna chewed her lip, searching for the right word, “—good?”

“I feel like it’s probably more neutral than good.” Jackie shrugged. Her hands moved from calves, to thighs, to hips, where she rested her weight against Shauna as she leaned closer. “Kiss me again.”

“What?” Shauna cracked a tentative smile.

“Kiss… me… again,” Jackie repeated, slow and firm, sitting up on her knees to close even more distance.

“You know,” Shauna laced her fingers together at the base of Jackie’s skull, “when I did that earlier, I didn’t realize it meant I’d be expected to kiss you on demand.”

“Kiss me again,” Jackie’s face was serious, despite Shauna’s joking, “so it stops feeling like goodbye.”

“Yeah,” Shauna said, in a daze.

She pulled Jackie closer and kissed her deeply. Jackie immediately parted her lips. Shauna drank her in. When they laid together that night, Shauna held Jackie—one arm wrapped tight around her waist, her chest flush against Jackie’s back. Shauna watched the hairs at the nape of Jackie’s neck move with her exhales, in absolute awe that they were here, together. Still. After everything.

“You want to know what the most fucked up thing is?” Jackie whispered.

Shauna pressed even closer. “Always.”

“That whole time, the main thing I was thinking about was how hard it is not to call you Shipman,” Jackie said. “That’s what I was thinking about.”

“You… you can if you want,” Shauna offered, though she knew already that Jackie wouldn’t.

“Mmm, no. It isn’t right,” Jackie said. “Not right now, at least. I… don’t know.”

“Okay.” Shauna nodded against her. A few moments passed, Shauna listening to each of Jackie’s breaths, feeling them lift her arm rhythmically. She placed a tentative kiss on the back of Jackie’s neck. “I missed you so fucking much.”

Jackie wrapped gentle fingers around Shauna’s wrist, and nestled deeper into her arms. “I missed you, too.”

5. be my whatever

Just as she'd expected, Shauna didn't get much sleep that night. It wasn't, however, related to her mistrust of her former teammates, nor was it due to the fitful waking pattern that drinking had begun to induce once she'd turned thirty. It started with a dream. A dream was so vivid in its accuracy, it felt as though someone had recorded a memory and pressed play for her.

Jackie was drunk. Drunker than Shauna, because Shauna, of course, had to drive them home. They were parked halfway between Lottie's house and Jackie's. It was really just the shoulder of a back road, not any sort of legitimate parking spot. It wasn't very hidden, either; a few trees partially obscured the car from view for anyone driving head on, but that was it. It wasn't the place that Shauna would've chosen to pull over, but she hadn't felt like she had much of a choice in the matter. Jackie had been demanding her attention, and who was she not to give Jackie exactly what she wanted?

Jackie had wanted Shauna to pull over so desperately, in fact, that she'd resorted to unbuckling her seatbelt and pressing herself against Shauna's side. She'd slipped one hand behind Shauna's neck and squeezed her thigh with the other, whispering in her ear, *"pull over, pull over, pull over,"* her breath hot against Shauna's cheek.

Shauna had protested with a whine, *"I already shouldn't really be driving right now, you need to put your seatbelt—fuck."* But Jackie had traced the column of Shauna's neck with her tongue, drawing herself back up to her ear and sucking on the skin just below it. So, naturally, Shauna had cranked the steering wheel to the side, legitimately afraid that she might otherwise crash the car. It had been bold on Jackie's part. Generally, she waited for Shauna to kiss her. She flirted, sure, but she just had one of those personalities—kind to everyone, endlessly charming. At least, that's what Shauna told herself. Jackie had definitely never started something while Shauna was still driving, that was for damn sure.

Shauna threw the car into park. She felt her eyes stretch deer-in-headlights wide. She was lightheaded, perhaps a little more drunk than she'd thought. Jackie twisted the keys out of the ignition, tossing them onto the dash. Shauna was still staring straight ahead when she heard Jackie's timid voice from beside her.

"Shipman? Are you okay?"

Shit. Her reaction must've read as a rejection. Jackie had come onto her, she'd slammed them off the road, and then she'd sat there, immobile, one hand clutching the steering wheel, the other on the gear shift. They didn't *do* this normally, didn't let the momentum die down, didn't allow for a lull that could force them to actually face what they were doing.

"Yeah, Jax." Shauna ran one hand through her hair and unbuckled her seatbelt with the other. "Yeah."

Shauna's body was all heat, blood molten and coursing through her veins at an alarming speed. She took a shaky breath before turning to Jackie. Jackie's legs were tucked beneath

her, her body already directed toward Shauna. She played with her hair, running it through both of her hands. Her chest rose and fell rapidly under her thin dress. She was clearly fighting tears. Shauna wanted to comfort her. She needed to reassure her but, *fuck,* she felt as though the part of her brain that allowed her to actually form words was on hiatus, because all she could do was stare at Jackie's pouting lips. She reached for her instead, pulling her hair out of her nervous grasp.

Jackie shuffled her hands to her lap and looked down. "Sorry," she whispered. "I don't know what I was—"

"No," Shauna said. "No, I… I liked that."

She could feel the color bleeding into her skin, a hot blush sweeping across her cheeks. Jackie smiled, her energy renewed. The way she looked at Shauna—excited, expectant, hungry—made Shauna's head spin faster.

Jackie smirked, leaning closer. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Shauna grabbed her waist, the angle making it a little awkward, and kissed her gently.

Jackie didn't seem to want gentle. She fisted both hands through Shauna's hair, yanking impatiently. Shauna opened her mouth to her and Jackie immediately obliged, rolling her tongue deep, making Shauna groan. It usually took them a while to work up to this point, but for whatever reason things were different that night—they were gaining momentum with every touch, tumbling out of control. Shauna felt Jackie reach down, her arm bumping Shauna's knee. Shauna chased her lips, unwilling to break the kiss, and wondered vaguely what she was doing and—

Slam.

Jackie had released the seat lever all at once, sending Shauna flying backwards. The movement broke both their kiss and their grasp on each other in its force. Shauna's head rocked back and forth a few times. She raised her eyebrows and grinned at Jackie, who was giggling from her spot hunched over the center console.

"Come here," Shauna said.

With some tricky navigation, she managed to guide Jackie onto her lap. Jackie immediately sat straddling her, her short dress riding up so much that when Shauna laid fingers on her hips she was met with bare skin and thin cotton underwear. Jackie and Shauna let out twin hisses, something electric passing between them. They panted, staring fixedly into each other's eyes, hazy with alcohol and anticipation and need, until Jackie took Shauna's cheeks between her hands and slammed their lips together.

Shauna knew that it was very possible she ought to move her hands. That maybe things were going too far, a line was being crossed. She would move them to safer territory, if Jackie wanted her to. Of course she would. But unprompted, with Jackie's tongue sliding against her own and Jackie's skin hot to the touch? Shauna could no sooner let go of Jackie than fly Kevin Carnold to the fucking moon. She compromised by freeing up Jackie's mouth. That way, Jackie could tell her to move her hands if she wanted her to and Shauna could taste Jackie's skin, get high on her perfume. Win–win.

She worked her way down Jackie's jaw with sloppy kisses. She slid down to her neck, careful not to leave any hickeys—she knew the drill—and zeroed in on a spot she knew Jackie liked. Shauna scraped her teeth against the base of Jackie's neck, right where it met her collarbone. And Jackie did something she'd never done before; she gasped loudly and shot her hips forward, thrusting against Shauna's lap. Shauna felt heat pool in her abdomen, felt blood rushing to her head, felt like her skin was electric.

Jackie began to stiffen, her muscles tense and her body perfectly still. Shauna was terrified that she might end things there, and she couldn't cope with the thought of Jackie never doing that again. Her body took over. She sucked hard at that same magical spot, hickeys be damned, and dug her fingers into Jackie's hips, pulling them forward sharply. The moan Jackie let out was the sweetest sound Shauna had ever heard. She wanted to make Jackie moan like that forever. She very much doubted that stupid fucking Jeff had ever made her moan like that. Jackie threw herself forward, snaking her arms behind Shauna's upper body to grip her shoulders from behind. She shifted her hips slightly, readjusting her position, to center herself over one of Shauna's legs instead of both.

Shauna pulled Jackie flush against her, her arms wrapped solidly around her waist,to prevent her from backing away. Their chests were pressed against each other and, *yeah*, technically that also happened when they hugged, but in this context… Shauna was overwhelmed by sensation. She raised her leg slightly, tensing the muscle of her thigh. Jackie whimpered, her face buried in Shauna's neck.

"Fuck," Shauna groaned, biting her tongue to prevent any words that she might regret from tumbling out of her mouth.

She guided Jackie down and forward fast, holding her breath and praying that it was what Jackie wanted. Shauna had flipped a switch in Jackie. Together they'd ignited something. Jackie bit the crook of Shauna's neck hard—like, she was definitely going to have a bruise tomorrow, hard—and slammed her own hips forward again. They shuddered. Jackie latched onto Shauna's neck, trailing her lips up and down, sucking with varying amounts of pressure, soothing the little bites she made with her tongue. Jackie had always been so fucking good at kissing her. Shauna guided her hips into rough grinds against her thigh. Her own dress rode up when Jackie shifted in her lap, so Jackie's underwear were directly against her skin. She was wet. Shauna could feel it. Her heart pounded harder against her ribs, she felt far higher than any drugs had ever taken her.

After a few minutes of grinding—Jackie thrusting her own hips, Shauna simply holding on for the ride—Jackie's legs started shaking so violently that Shauna wondered in awe if she'd be able to hold herself up much longer. Jackie tore her lips away from Shauna's neck and gasped, pressing her forehead against Shauna's temple. As abruptly as she'd begun, Jackie stopped moving her hips. Shauna's stomach dropped.

"Jackie… are you o— *fuck!"* Shauna sucked in a breath and threw her head back against the seat.

Jackie hadn't stopped for good. She'd been adjusting herself to straddle one of Shauna's thighs and, in doing so, she'd pressed her knee directly between Shauna's legs. Shauna looked up at her—panting, dazed. Jackie's eyes were dark. She swallowed audibly, her throat bobbing. Shauna couldn't for the life of her tell if what Jackie had done was accidental or

intentional, but in order to keep her knee pressed against Shauna, Jackie had lifted her hips high enough that she was no longer seated on Shauna's thigh.

Their eyes still locked, Shauna lifted her leg slowly. She rested her foot on the dashboard, allowing her thigh to hover, and gently pulled Jackie down until she made contact. Jackie arched her back, planting a hand on Shauna's chest to hold herself upright. As Jackie ground her hips down, she just barely moved her knee in time—really more like tensing and relaxing her muscles rhythmically. Shauna covered Jackie's hand with her own where it lay on her breastbone, and squeezed her eyes shut.

She couldn't keep her eyes open. All she could do was focus on the pressure building in her abdomen. But when Jackie's moans went sharp, when her panting went irregular, Shauna forced herself. She wanted to watch this more than she'd ever wanted anything else. Jackie's dress had ridden up even further, exposing her tan stomach. Her hair was wild, like the bedhead she got after sleeping off a hangover or crashing after a game, and her eyes were screwed shut.

"Jackie?" Shauna asked breathlessly. She had no clue what she was asking for, but she needed Jackie. She needed more of her, somehow.

Jackie's eyes fluttered open. "Mmm." She licked her swollen lips and brought her free hand to Shauna's cheek.

Shauna nodded quickly, her heart squeezing. Leave it to Jackie to know what Shauna needed more than Shauna did. Jackie's abdomen twitched. Her legs trembled. Even her hands shook against Shauna's face and chest. Shauna squeezed Jackie's hips tighter and watched her eyes roll closed.

"I… I'm going to… fuck," Jackie whimpered. "I love you, Shauna, I—oh!"

Jackie screwed her face up and cried out. Completely undone. Completely stunning. She was some sort of painting, too perfect to be real. And as she'd finished, she'd told Shauna that she loved her. Short of breath and mostly incoherent, Jackie had managed to mumble it: *I love you, Shauna*. Shauna was quick to follow. She bucked her hips up and whined, no words forming. Her body shook the way Jackie's had moments before, and the knot in her belly snapped loose.

Shauna knew what had happened in real life after that.

They'd pulled apart, straightened their dresses, and finished driving to Jackie's, where they'd gone to bed without discussing any of it. Shauna had thought she'd heard Jackie crying faintly when she was in the bathroom, had assumed she regretted it, had felt her heart break. Jackie had laid down silently, spooning Shauna from behind, and they'd both pretended to sleep.

That didn't happen in Shauna's dream.

In Shauna's dream, the scenery morphed and twisted around them. It was no longer the hazy warmth of street lights and the moon cutting through the night.

It was blindingly bright.

There was snow on the ground.

Snow on the hood of the car.

Snow inside the car.

Piling up around Jackie, still perched in Shauna's lap.

Shauna clawed at it, desperately trying to keep it away from Jackie, but she'd already begun to turn blue—her lips and cheeks frozen, her eyes shut, white powder clinging to her lashes. It was coming too fast. Shauna screamed, and Jackie called her name, though Shauna wasn't sure how, because her lips couldn't even part, and—

"Shauna. *Shauna!"*

It was Jackie's voice calling her name, but it was deeper with age.

Fingers dug into her shoulders, shaking her roughly. Shauna bolted upright with a gasp, her hair plastered to her sweaty forehead and neck, and clutched at her chest. It hurt to breathe—the air felt sharp, as if it truly was below freezing. She heard the lamp switch on and a dull glow filled the room. Jackie—current Jackie, real Jackie, alive Jackie—was sitting up in bed, facing her. Concern marred her features. She looked as though she'd been deeply asleep just moments ago, her hair half out of its bun, her eyelids heavy against the sudden light, a little spot of drool dried down on her cheek.

Shauna shot a hand out towards her and Jackie grabbed it quickly, squeezing. Warm. Her fingers were warm. Her lips were pink and her cheeks were rosy. Shauna managed to slow her breathing and, eventually, the air stopped hurting. Jackie sat back against the headboard, opening her arms wordlessly. Shauna leaned into her and they sat like that for a few minutes, Jackie playing mindlessly with her hair. For the first time, Shauna had dreamt of Jackie's death and awoke in a world where Jackie was very much alive. Something deep inside her twisted. She would do anything, give up anything, to never wake up from one of those dreams without Jackie by her side again. Shauna squeezed Jackie's waist a little tighter.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Jackie asked, trailing her fingertips up and down Shauna's side.

"No," Shauna whispered.

She felt Jackie's chin bob against the crown of her head. Jackie yawned and Shauna released her, sinking down until she was flat on her back.

"We can stay up if you want," Jackie said gently.

"It's okay." Shauna swallowed, tracking the line of Jackie's eyes as they bounced from her head to her toes and back up. Jackie had been catologing her, too. Taking her in. It gave Shauna chills.

"Roll over." Jackie jutted her chin out toward the wall.

"Why—" Shauna frowned. Jackie brushed Shauna's hair out of her eyes, and she quieted. Real. It was real. Jackie was alive.

"I want to hold you," Jackie explained, the smallest hint of a blush warming her cheeks even more. Shauna really fucking liked how pink looked on her. She turned, facing the wall, and waited for Jackie to touch her. Jackie clicked the lamp off and slid down, pressing her

chest to Shauna's back, and snaked one arm around her waist and the other beneath her pillow. Jackie enveloped her. She slotted herself against Shauna in a way that left no gaps. "Are you going to be able to sleep?" Jackie asked.

Shauna placed her arm over Jackie's. "Don't know."

"Want me to stay up with you?" Jackie swiped her thumb back and forth across Shauna's stomach.

Shauna laced her fingers through Jackie's. "No, you sleep."

She knew full well that, between the crushing pressure around her heart and the dull ache between her thighs, she wouldn't be getting another minute of sleep. She would lie there, listening to Jackie breathe. But that, she thought, was more than enough.

The next morning, the other women settled into the same spots they'd chosen the night before. Shauna watched as Jackie hurried around the kitchen, trying to make enough coffee for everyone, attempting to get some food going at the same time. Shauna wasn't willing to bet that one of the many changes Jackie had made was related to her skills in the kitchen. She intervened, bumping Jackie's hip with her own to scoot her away from the stove, and took the pan of eggs out of her hand. Jackie scrunched her nose playfully, and Shauna resisted the incredible urge to kiss her.

She was truly happy, for the first time in God knew how long, but happiness didn't alleviate the feeling that she was a fraud. Trying to what, play at domesticity with Jackie? Knowing that she had a husband and a daughter who hadn't heard her voice in days? Knowing that she was standing in a room full of women who together formed a powder keg, ready to blow at the first hint of trouble? Now was not the time to dance around the kitchen with Jackie, playing house.

Shauna tossed some of the ready-made pastries in the oven to warm. She finished off the eggs, washed some fruit, and brought it all out to the living room. Jackie had already set out silverware and plates, along with cream and sugar for the coffee. She was giving warm, hopeful smiles and fixing plates for people and all around melting Shauna's fucking heart. Shauna might've actually been happy in the lifestyle she'd painstakingly carved out for herself, if she had been doing it with Jackie. She probably wouldn't resent every meal she cooked from scratch, if Jackie was the one sitting across the table from her. She doubted she'd violently throw the laundry into the machine, if it were Jackie's clothes she was washing. She might not even be such a shitty mom, if it was Jackie she parented with.

Well… she'd probably still be a shitty mom, but Jackie would more than balance it out.

Shauna took her seat, her coffee clasped between her hands, and tried to pull herself away from bullshit fantasies of a domestic life with Jackie Taylor that she knew she'd never live. Jackie's voice rang out, clear and bright. Jackie had always been a morning person, once she'd been woken. As soon as she was upright, she was full steam ahead. Shauna would constantly spend the early hours begging her to be a little quieter, a little calmer. Begging her to dim herself.

“Alright, so,” Jackie said, taking her seat next to Shauna, “last night went about as well as could be expected. But I’m hoping maybe today we can be a little more… understanding of each other. Like, let’s give each other time to explain our shit, yeah?”

“Aye, aye, cap,” Nat said. She popped a croissant between her teeth, using her newly freed hands to pour herself a large cup of coffee.

“Agreed,” Tai said. “I don’t have all the time in the world. I’d like to get us to a better place before I go back to work.”

“We all want out of here.” Van’s tone was a little sharp, but much less so than the one she’d been taking with Shauna. Shauna didn’t allow herself to dwell long on the fact that she was somehow worse than the ex-girlfriend. “Not to, y’know, make laws and shit. But we all have lives to get back to.”

“So, what we have so far is,” Lottie set her untouched plate of food on her lap, “someone cut Van’s brakes, the fake reporter that came to visit us was hired by Tai, Misty killed her but she’s convinced she did a really good job of it, we got creepy postcards with the symbol on them, and you guys were blackmailed for fifty grand, which you paid. Am I missing anything we’ve already talked about?”

“Wow.” Nat smirked. “Thanks for the meeting minutes, Lot.”

Lottie shrugged, flashing her a small smile.

“I think that’s it, yeah,” Jackie said. She fidgeted with the ring on her middle finger—the gold band with the opal.

“Hold on.” Tai frowned. “How did you know about the blackmail? We didn’t talk about that yesterday.”

“Mmm, might want to ask Shauna what she’s been telling her girlfriend over there,” Nat said, with a wink.

“I’m sure we were going to get to this later,” Shauna shot Natalie a glare, “but I didn’t have to tell Jackie anything. They already knew.”

“Okay, remember, a little less judgment would be great, guys,” Jackie said, with a pleading look and an encouraging tone. “Should we jump into this part now?”

“I think we sort of glossed over the whole *murdering a woman who was clearly hired to investigate us* piece of the pie.” Van set her coffee down in front of her with a small clank and shot Misty a pointed look. “How sure are we that we aren’t going to be on the short list for that one?”

“Very sure! I injected her cigarettes with fentanyl. I combed her entire phone, all her info.” Misty pushed her glasses up. ‘She was a loner who didn’t tell anyone anything about her life. Especially not about her work. It’s going to look like an accidental fentanyl overdose. I left no trace evidence, and she fits the bill for that sort of death to a T. No one is going to bother looking into it and, thankfully, Tai was incredibly careful about preventing any concrete links between them.’ Misty smiled at Tai. Tai grimaced. “And, even if they did suspect foul play—which they won’t—Jessica had a list of enemies a mile long. We wouldn’t be anywhere near the top of it.”

Misty nibbled on her scone, proud of herself.

"Right," Van mumbled, shaking her head. "Good work, Misty. Gold fucking star."

"Okay, how do we want to move forward?" Misty chirped, ignoring Van's sarcasm. "I feel like we're lacking a system here. Should we go chronologically, or no, maybe that's too hard because we don't know each other's timelines for things. *Oh!* Want to do it by crime? Finish the murders, then move on to blackmail?"

"Lord help us," Nat said.

"Umm… gosh, Misty, I'm not sure." Jackie smiled kindly. "I think maybe… maybe we should just sort of let it flow?"

"Shauna," Lottie said, "do you want to go next?"

"Me?" Shauna blinked at her.

"What, like you don't have things to share with the group?" Nat asked.

"I like that idea," Misty said. "It fits with the *going by type of crime* suggestion!"

"By… type of crime?" Van asked slowly, staring directly at Jackie. Jackie avoided her eyes, squeezing her hands into fists on her lap. "As in… I have to listen to Shauna confess to murder? That's what I'm doing today?"

"Well, I meant to insinuate that my murder wasn't the only one earlier, Van," Misy clarified. "Sorry if you missed that."

"I thought you were referring to the fact that Travis *got* murdered, Misty!" Van snapped. "I didn't think this was going to be a circle-jerk of *this is how I killed someone* stories."

Shauna pinched the bridge of her nose. Her headache was never going to ease away. The rest of her life was going to be one giant fucking migraine. (Which was fine, of course, as long as Jackie stayed in it.)

Van sprang to her feet and headed toward the hallway. Lottie was quick to stand, clearly intending to follow.

"I've got it, Lot," Jackie said quickly, already halfway to the hallway in pursuit of Van.

Van and Jackie stood far enough from the others that they couldn't hear what they were saying, but Shauna could see them if she leaned back in her chair. Nat noticed the awkward stretch of her back and scrambled to her side, crouching as though that would camouflage her movements. Soon enough, Misty and Tai joined them, craning their necks to watch. Lottie alone remained seated, picking at her food.

Jackie and Van were facing each other, standing practically toe-to-toe. They either didn't see the women gaping at them, or were ignoring them. They looked serious—Van shaking her head firmly and Jackie talking with her hands, her long fingers moving in large, sweeping motions. Jackie pressed a hand to Van's chest and Van immediately stopped bouncing on her heels, relaxing at Jackie's touch. It looked… intimate.

What the fuck?

“Man,” Nat whispered, “I know they were friends but I never would’ve thought those two would be that close. Not after all the shit out there. Fucking bizarre.”

“They dated,” Lottie said simply.

Nat, Shauna, Taissa, and Misty whipped around to stare at her. Nat fell forward in her haste, smacking to the group, hip first, and wincing.

“*What?”* Shauna and Tai said in tandem.

“When we were in our early twenties.” Lottie shrugged. “A long time ago. Not for long though. At least, not long enough to make things weird. They stayed close.”

Shauna saw red. Her heart pounded. She felt a lump rise in her throat.

Nat let out a low whistle and grabbed Misty’s arm, dragging her onto the couch. “Come on, Misty, I don’t think anyone should stand too close to those two right now.”

“Jackie’s gay?” Misty whispered, loudly.

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s what surprised them,” Nat said. “That particular love triangle connected on every corner, right, Shauna?”

White hot anger turned Shauna’s stomach. She ignored the dig.

“You know what, everything makes a lot more sense now,” Misty mused.

Calm down, Shauna told herself, *calm down, calm down, calm down.*

Footsteps approached them. Tai returned to her seat on the couch, her mouth hanging open a bit but her face otherwise stoic and expressionless. Van and Jackie paused the moment they entered the room, taking in the shift in the atmosphere. Shauna kept her head down. She felt air whooshing past her ears—trapped in a tunnel, whizzing down a hill, pressure and muffled sound. She might vomit if she looked into Jackie’s eyes.

“So, Van is… staying for now,” Jackie said carefully. “We can—”

“Running around with Jackie fucking Taylor,” Tai muttered under her breath, loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. “That’s a motherfucking trip.”

“Oh, fucking hell,” Van said, dejected.

“Lottie!” Jackie snapped. “Why?”

Her eyes were wide discs of hazel, piercing and beautiful and a little terrifying. She ran both hands through her hair before letting them come to rest on her hips.

“I—well, really I just didn’t think.” Lottie chewed on her lip. “It sort of slipped out. But… aren’t we confessing things right now, anyway?”

“Yeah, *relevant* things,” Jackie said. “Who dated who, like, twenty years ago isn’t exactly relevant!”

“I feel like there’s an argument to be made that knowing the group *dynamics,”* Nat raised a brow playfully, “is relevant right now.”

“Okay, Nat.” Van said. She grinned, but her eyes remained cold. “Let’s talk about you and Lottie sneaking around together all of Sophomore and Junior year, then.”

Nat sank back into the couch. “The woman makes a fair point,” she conceded.

Lottie blushed, suddenly very interested in the fruit on her plate.

“Yeah, didn’t fucking think so. Because it’s ancient history. You want to talk about something current that might affect the *group dynamics*, it’s those two.” Van waved in Shauna and Jackie’s direction. “Doesn’t have shit to do with me.”

“Get off my fucking ass, Palmer,” Shauna said, jumping to her feet. The anger was flowing now and, because she couldn’t be angry with Jackie, it was hurtling toward the next best thing. ‘Seriously,’ Shauna jabbed a finger into Van’s chest, “I would *love* for you to direct this broody bullshit anywhere else for just one fucking second! For fuck’s sake, what is your issue with me?” Van didn’t back down. She didn’t react. She was maddeningly calm. “You think we’re so different?” Shauna asked. “You and I are the same.”

“We,” Van shoved Shauna back roughly, but Shauna held her ground, fighting the sway in her shoulders, “are nowhere near the same, you crazy fucking bitch!”

“Twenty bucks Shauna completely loses her shit and beats her ass,” Nat sneered from somewhere behind them.

“Hmm, Van is often underestimated,” Misty said. “I’d take that bet.”

“Van could,” Nat said, “but I don’t think she wo—”

“No one,” Jackie shrieked, slipping between Van and Shauna, ‘is taking any fucking bets!’ She placed a hand on each of their chests, giving Van a gentle shove away from Shauna. “Van, sit the fuck down!” Van swore under her breath, shaking her head, but she shuffled to her seat. Lottie reached for her. She jerked away. “Shauna,” Jackie planted both hands on Shauna’s chest, “please, just sit. Okay? Please.”

Shauna took a deep breath, avoiding Jackie’s eyes, before backing into her seat. Jackie flopped into her own seat the moment she did.

“Okay, I’ve got to know what kind of magical powers this bitch possesses,” Tai scoffed, shaking her head. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m not for this schoolyard fight bullshit, but you’re both backing down? Just like that? Because *Jackie* gave you puppy dog eyes—”

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Tai.” Jackie crossed her legs, swinging her foot in little circles. “Lick your wounds without dragging me into it.”

“I’m not wounded. It’s been years.” Tai tried to sound unphased, but it didn’t land. “Besides, it sort of feels like you dragged yourself into it.”

Van buried her face in her hands, her knee bouncing up and down so quickly it rocked her neck with it.

“Tai,” Jackie’s voice softened, “I—it wasn’t that serious.”

“Yeah,” Tai laughed sharply, “clearly. It’s *you*, Jackie. In no world would I assume it was.”

“Wow, okay, rude,” Jackie said. “I was trying to make you feel better, bitch.”

“You just said it yourself!” Tai said.

“I didn’t mean it like that, and you know it!”

Van jumped up as though burned. “Jesus Christ. What I’m not in the mood for right now is a walk down memory lane with the ghosts of exes past.” Jackie and Tai both opened their mouths, but Van didn’t give them an inch of dead air. ‘Shocking, I know. So, what I’m going to do is go have a fucking cigarette, and when I come back, this shit,’ she waved between Jackie and Tai, a pack of smokes already in her hand as though she’d magicked it out of thin air, “is not going to be the topic of conversation, got it?”

Tai and Jackie both sat with their arms crossed, glaring at each other. It was yet another callback to old times and, under other circumstances, Shauna would’ve jumped in to ease the tension between them. She, however, was currently very busy trying not to leap up and deck Van, her knuckles white from gripping the arms of her chair.

“Jack,” Van said sternly. “I will leave. Seriously. Cut the drama.”

Jackie rolled her eyes. “Says the one who almost punched Shauna.”

“Okay!” Nat yelled before Van could respond. “I’ll go with you, Van, c’mon.”

“So,” Misty said, “were all of you hooking up with each other besides me?”

Everyone groaned.

“Well!” Misty said brightly. “Just a bunch of ex-girlfriends getting together for a little vacation. How sweet! I’ve heard lesbians are especially good at staying friends with their exes. Under normal circumstances, I mean. I think once we all get over the initial shock, things will go just fine.”

“Yikes, Misty.” Lottie chuckled in disbelief. “You’ve heard, huh?”

The tension broke, a few giggles cutting through it. Everyone had returned to their seats, cigarettes smoked and coffees topped off.

“Right, so,” Van offered in a measured tone, “Tai hired the lady, Misty killed the lady, we think the lady won’t be linked to us.”

“Jessica,” Misty insisted. “Her name was Jessica.”

“Right, Jessica.” Van pursed her lips then locked eyes with Shauna. “Want to tell us who you offed, then?”

“Van,” Jackie said sternly. She tilted her body towards Shauna in her chair. She didn’t reach for her, but she shifted closer to her all the same, and it gave Shauna the push she needed. She wanted to drag Jackie back into their room and crawl under the covers with her, but that wasn’t an option. Jackie was anxious, clearly desperate to smooth the Van thing over. No matter how angry she was, Shauna couldn’t let this ruin things between them. She wasn’t going to turn her anger towards Jackie—she had no right to, not with Jeff’s ring on her finger—and she was going to keep her interactions with Van as civil as she could.

“I’m going to say this as clearly as possible, but there are a lot of details and this encompasses a lot, so just…” Shauna paused, glancing around the room at everyone except Van, whose eyes she planned to avoid from then on, “if everyone could just let me finish before commenting I’d… appreciate it.”

“Not sure how hard it is to say *hey, I stabbed my boyfriend,”* Nat said. “But sure, Shauna.”

Everyone’s gaze fell immediately to Jackie. They were waiting for her reaction. She ignored it, leaning even further over the arm of the chair that was closest to Shauna, and kept her face unreadable.

“Natalie! That’s not—” Shauna sighed. “Goddamn it. That’s not the whole thing. There’s more to it. Actually… Jackie is the only one who knows the whole story.”

The satisfaction Shauna got from watching jaws drop at that revelation took a slight hit when she saw Tai chewing on her lip, wringing her hands. Shauna would talk to her later, one on one, and try to do damage control.

“Go ahead, Shauna,” Jackie prompted softly. “No one’s going to interrupt,” she added, with a finality that clearly communicated that anyone who did would be answering to her.

“Right, well… someone was blackmailing us,” Shauna said. “They sent texts about how much money to drop and where, and we followed the instructions. We tried to trace them, but it didn’t go well—”

“That’s an understatement,” Taissa muttered.

“I had been… um, having an *affair* with a man I’d run into a few times. It started to seem suspicious. When I googled his name, nothing came up. I called the school he said he’d gone to and they had no record of him. I thought he was the one blackmailing us, so I… went to confront him. He… well, I looked through his stuff while he was in the bathroom and he had a bunch of Yellowjackets shit. Like those… magazines and books, you know the ones.” Shauna paused to inhale, her hands clasped in her lap, her nails digging into her skin. The room was silent, waiting. “I confronted him about it. He came at me, and he wouldn’t… he wouldn’t back up, and I panicked. I… well… stabbed him. He, um, bled out. When I got home, I told Jeff what I’d done—”

Gasps pierced the silence.

“I told Jeff what I’d done,” Shauna repeated. “That someone had blackmailed us, and I thought it was this guy I’d been seeing. He told me that…” she glanced at Tai, trying to look as apologetic as possible, “he had actually been the one who… blackmailed us, because the store was going bankrupt and he didn’t want to tell me.”

“Jeff motherfucking Sadecki!” Nat shouted. “Your idiot husband has fifty thousand dollars of *my* goddamn money?”

“Nat,” Lottie said carefully, “I can totally give you that money back. Let’s just… let Shauna finish. It isn’t a big deal, I can—”

“It’s the *principle* of the thing, *Shauna.”* Nat’s eyes were wide, her hands waving madly. “I mean, fuck!”

“Were you ever going to tell us?” Tai asked evenly.

“I don’t know,” Shauna said, truthfully. “I really don’t.”

“Finish it,” Misty said. “I want to hear the rest.”

“*So,*” Shauna said, “Jeff told me he was going to take the fall for me. Turn himself in—”

“How sweet,” Nat sneered. “The man who blackmails his wife is willing to go to prison for her. What a keeper.”

Tai put a hand on Nat’s knee, and she bit her tongue.

“I told him that would be worse. That if cops dug around in our lives like that all of us—like, *all* the Yellowjackets—would be screwed. It would all come out. So… I called you guys.” Shauna looked to the couch where Nat, Tai, and Misty sat, straight-backed and tense. ‘Then,’ Shauna turned pointedly to Lottie and Van, but tried to dodge the daggers that Van was glaring in her direction, “we cleaned everything up. Misty got rid of the body. We don’t think we left any evidence, but he *is* sort of… on the news as a missing person.”

“Fuck,” Van said simply.

Lottie just nodded wearily.

“Well, we knew that would happen!” Misty tried to soothe. It was grating. “I mean, definitely a calculated risk there. But I have full faith in our work.”

Tai shook her head. “Damn, Shauna.”

“For what it’s worth, Tai,” Shauna said, “I’m really fucking sorry.”

“And you weren’t in on it?” Nat demanded. “On the blackmailing, I mean? It was all pea-brained *Mr.* Sadecki?”

“What—Nat, of course I wasn’t in on it!”

“Sue me for having questions,” Nat said. “Like you didn’t lie your ass off to get us to cover for you murdering your fucking boyfriend. You really move on quick, huh?” Nat’s eyes flicked to Jackie.

“That’s enough,” Jackie whispered.

“Sorry, Jackie,” Nat said, her shoulders slouching forward suddenly. “We don’t mean to—I don’t mean to drag you, it’s just…” she trailed off, looking Shauna up and down.

Jackie opened her mouth, but Tai beat her to it. “Okay, wait,” she said, clearly deep in thought. “Did everyone get a postcard except for Shauna?”

There were nods and murmurs of agreement.

“So, Shauna,” Tai looked sympathetic, as though apologizing in advance for whatever she was about to say, “how do we know that it wasn’t part of Jeff’s blackmail thing? I mean, maybe he didn’t want to scare you with it if he didn’t think he needed to?”

“There’s no way he knew where all of us were,” Van said. “Where Jackie was? No way.”

“Van’s right.” Shauna cringed internally at having to say the words aloud. “He’s not that smart, Tai. He did a shit job with the texts and the pickup and everything. He wasn’t tracking

down the others."

"O-kay, in the spirit of confessions," Misty sat forward, her hands planted on her knees, "I have a small confession to make."

"I knew it!" Nat jumped to her feet and pointed a trembling finger at Misty. "I fucking knew it. God damn it, Misty!"

"Misty," Tai groaned. "Tell me you didn't."

"Okay, hear me out. I *did* send the postcards—" There was a mass cacophony from the group. "—but! *But* it was for a good reason! All the other stuff was happening. We needed to be drawn back together, because they *wanted* us in isolation. It's much easier to attack people when they aren't sharing information," she insisted. "And I was the only one who knew where everyone was. My citizen detective group has some avid Yellowjackets junkies—it's part of why I'm in it, to keep tabs—and there's a lot of people talking right now. A lot of people are theorizing and it's like… someone is feeding them information. It's suspicious. Add in the violence and threats against us and it just made sense."

Glass shattered. Nat stood next to the wall. The broken top of an empty wine bottle that had been left out the night before was held tight in her hand, and blood was trailing from her wrist to her elbow.

"Natalie!" Tai started toward her.

Misty beat her to the punch, shoving her glasses up and running to Nat's side. "Are you okay? What's going—"

Nat raised the jagged remains of the bottle and pointed them straight at Misty. Misty froze, just out of reach.

"Natalie," Shauna said cautiously. She edging towards them, her hands raised in front of her.

"Did you kill him, Misty?" Nat screamed. "Did you fucking kill him? Don't fucking lie to me!" Nat sobbed, her voice broken, her hands trembling.

"I— *what?* No!" Misty took half a step backward. "I didn't kill him. I would *never* kill one of us."

Nat studied her carefully. The room held their breath collectively, hanging on the edge of action, until she lowered her arm slowly. Still, no one moved.

"You… you knew his house," Nat said. "The layout and everything. I noticed that. How?"

"I sent him a postcard, too. I called him to follow up, but he didn't answer. So… I went to see if I could figure anything out. I drove to his place and I broke in— *without* smashing the glass and getting arrested—but I didn't see anything out of place," Misty explained, eyeing the broken bottle still clutched ready in Nat's hand. "I left without seeing him. I thought I'd have more luck getting him involved once you were, and I knew you'd turn up on your own."

Misty sounded earnest. Shauna wasn't sure if that was the whole story, but she had no reason to believe Misty had killed Travis. It wasn't her style. Nat looked appeased for the

time being. She dropped the rest of the bottle onto the mess of glass and sank down the wall next to it, crouching with her head in her hands. Misty reached a tentative hand toward her.

"Fuck off, Misty," Nat growled through her fingers.

"Wait a minute," Shauna said. "You sent everyone a stupid postcard, except me? Why?"

Misty sighed dramatically, then flopped herself back down on the couch. "Okay, well it was logistical. A tactical move," she said. "But also… I sort of wanted everyone to get back together for old time's sake, too. Especially since I'd found Jackie. I thought everyone would want to see her."

Jackie scoffed.

"Old time's sake?" Van whispered. "Je—sus."

Misty shot her a look.

"Okay, and?" Jackie asked. "That still doesn't explain why you didn't send one to Shauna."

"Well, Shauna is the easiest to track down," Misty said. 'I guess her and Tai, with her whole politician thing. But Shauna just… never left. She stayed right where she's always been.' Shauna scoffed and crossed her arms. "Well, you can't tell me I'm *wrong.* You stayed in Wiskayok, you married Jeff and you—you probably did it to torture yourself, really. Have you ever spoken to a therapist about it? I think you might learn a lot about yourself from a good therapist, it can be very beneficial," Misty rambled keenly. "I can send you some recommendations, if you—"

"*Misty!"* Shauna and Tai snapped at the same time. "Focus," Tai added.

Shauna felt Jackie's eyes on her, almost burned under their intensity. She ignored it.

"Gosh, you try to help a girl out." Misty pursed her lips. "So, anyway, Shauna is easy to find. I knew we could go to her whenever we wanted to but, like I said, I thought a nice little reunion first would be good for morale and—"

"And, what, Misty?" Nat barked up at her, her eyes red and swollen and her patience clearly worn thin. "Cut to the chase."

Misty gave another comically large sigh. "Well, Shauna isn't fun." She shrugged. "She's sort of… scary and mean, and I know she has unresolved anger issues and I *really* didn't want anyone getting killed. Which, by the way, did happen almost immediately."

Silence.

Shauna opened her mouth, shut it. Then she laughed. A huge, tears in her eyes, belly laugh. Nat was the first to join in, tossing her head back against the wall. Tai bit her lip, trying to stave off a grin before dissolving with them. Jackie covered her mouth to muffle her giggles. Even Van and Lottie started to chuckle. Misty grinned a little uncertainly, seemingly unsure whether they were laughing at her or with her.

"I'm—" Shauna gasped, wiping tears from her face, "not fun? That's why you didn't send me a creepy fucking postcard?"

“Well, yeah,” Misty said. “But it was unfair of me and I’m sorry for that, Shauna. I didn’t mean for you to feel left out. And I really should’ve known that Jackie wouldn’t be able to resist going straight to you. That’s why I gave her your address. I thought that could make up for it. I really did feel bad.”

Jackie cackled—another real, patented, rasping Jackie Taylor laugh. It made the rest of them laugh harder.

“You’re really not one to call Shauna out, Misty.” Tai said, fixing her hair back in a ponytail with a grin plastered on her face.

Shauna snorted.

“I mean she isn’t wrong,” Nat said. “She just sort of missed the part where you really take stock of the rest of us. And when you do that, Shauna isn’t *that* much worse.”

That, Shauna thought, was one of the nicest things Nat had ever said about her.

“Definitely not *uninvited from the party* worse,” Lottie said.

“So glad I made the cut in the end.” Shauna wiped tears from beneath her eyes. “Thanks, guys.”

Shauna was startled by the lack of bitterness she felt. There would have been a sharp, unyeilding sense of betrayal there, before. But now, there was Jackie, perched on the arm of Shauna’s chair, leaving her own seat empty as they settled back down.

Confessionals were only tolerable for so long, and they hit their limit by early afternoon. Tai threw out a landline in the form of bureaucratic duty.

“I need to take some meetings,” she said. ‘Just by phone, I’m not driving back into town,’ she clarified quickly. “But I don’t want to do it here. I looked and there’s a hotel nearby that has a business center. I’m going to head there. That is, if nobody has any objections to picking this back up this evening?”

“Hotels,” Nat grinned, “have bars. I might just come with you.”

“It’s a Holiday Inn.” Tai rolled her eyes. “I don’t think they have a bar that’s open at one in the afternoon.”

Nat pouted.

“I could use a drink, too,” Van said. “We can find somewhere while Tai works.”

“I don’t think we should go out together in big groups,” Misty said. “Might be a media spectacle, you never know who’s around.”

Shauna and Jackie spoke at the same time:

“We’ll stay here—”

“You guys go, we can—”

Nat snorted with laughter. “Of course you can.”

"Well," Misty said, "I still don't know about the four of us going—"

"Misty," Lottie glanced at Jackie and Shauna, who were both shifting uncomfortably, "Van and I passed a Mexican restaurant on the way here. It isn't too far. Would you want to get lunch with me? My treat?"

"Oh, sure!" Misty said. "I love a good chile relleno, and groups of two seem perfectly reasonable to me!"

"Great," Tai said, halfway to the door. "So what does everybody say to meeting back here by five at the latest?"

"Works for me." Nat grabbed her keys and coat and nodded at Van. "Let's roll."

Misty looped an arm through Lottie's, chattering to her excitedly.

"Nat!" Shauna called after them. "Call me when you guys are done. We'll come pick you up. The last thing we need is you two making things easier for these creeps by taking yourselves out."

"Yep, will do!" Nat called over her shoulder. "Have fun you crazy kids."

"Van and I haven't so much as kissed in twenty years, Shauna. Okay?" Jackie was pacing in the bedroom, where they'd automatically retreated the moment everyone was out the door. "And I *was* going to tell you, I swear, but there's, like, a lot to tell and not very much time to tell it, y'know?"

"Jax," Shauna tried to sound as gentle as possible, "I'm not upset with you."

Jackie stopped in her tracks. "You're not?"

"No. I told you I killed a guy I was seeing and you were remarkably calm about it." Shauna cracked a small smile. "I think I can handle the fact that you dated Van a long time ago. I'm just… getting used to it, is all."

Shauna didn't really think she could handle it, so much as she thought she could pretend that it wasn't a thing that had happened, at least until she'd spent more time enjoying the fact that got to do things like hold a living, breathing Jackie Taylor, now. She slipped her arms around Jackie's waist, pulling her into a hug. Jackie relaxed against her, her arms tightening around her neck. Shauna pressed a kiss to her neck, pausing to gauge her reaction. As much as she wanted to hide it from Jackie, she was violently jealous, and she'd been thinking about her dream—the part before it devolved into a nightmare, of course—all morning. That, coupled with the fact that they were blissfully alone and had no way of knowing when that would happen again, had Shauna fighting the urge to pick Jackie up and toss her onto the bed.

Jackie seemed to share her sentiment. She yanked Shauna's head back by her hair and slammed their lips together. The kiss was intense, Jackie immediately forcing her way into Shauna's mouth. Her hands roamed all over Shauna's body—grabbing her hair and her hips and her ass, sneaking up underneath her shirt. Shauna was lightheaded. She tried to match Jackie's frantic pace, but she mostly just gripped Jackie's waist, holding steady to anchor herself. Jackie brought her lips down to Shauna's neck, and Shauna's entire body ached.

“Fuck, Jackie,” she moaned, unable to quiet herself. “I want… I—” Shauna wasn’t sure if she was allowed to ask for what she wanted just yet.

Jackie tore her lips off of Shauna’s neck, leaning in as if to kiss her again. “You want?” She was smirking; Shauna could feel the small smile against her lips. Jackie toyed with the button of her jeans and heat shot straight to her core. *‘What* do you want, Shauna?’ Those words from Jackie’s lips were enough to make her throb. She gasped, kissing Jackie again, because she really wanted to scream or cry or yelp, but she wasn’t certain she could do that, didn’t know if that was allowed. It was overwhelming, having Jackie like this when she’d gone so long without having her at all. Shauna slid her hands down to Jackie’s ass. Jackie hummed into her mouth before breaking away. “What,” Jackie backed Shauna toward the wall, “do you want, Shauna?”

Her eyes bore into Shauna’s. Shauna swallowed hard, biting back a whimper. She threaded her fingers through Jackie’s hair and pulled hard to tip her chin up, clearing the way to Jackie’s neck. She planted rough kisses there until she could find the strength to speak.

“I want to touch you,” she mumbled against Jackie’s skin.

Jackie groaned, then she let out a low little chuckle. Shauna could feel her throat vibrate under her tongue. Quick as lightning, Jackie popped the button of Shauna’s jeans open. She slid the zipper down and pressed her forehead to Shauna’s.

“Mmmm…” Jackie stroked Shauna’s cheek gently. “Me first, I think.”

Her fingers dipped just beneath the waistband of Shauna’s underwear and she paused, waiting. Shauna hissed and nodded quickly. She smiled sweetly and shoved Shauna back further, pressing her flush against the wall. Jackie moved so quickly—slipping her hand all the way down, collecting Shauna’s wetness on her fingertips and running her fingers back up—that the shocked moan Shauna released may have been classified as a scream by some.

Jackie circled Shauna’s clit, and Shauna was driven instantly to clenching around nothing. So worked up, so drunk on Jackie. She pressed her forehead to the crook of Jackie’s neck and whimpered, opening her hips as wide as she could in her jeans.

“Shauna,” Jackie said. Shauna nodded against her, nipping gently at her skin. It wasn’t enough acknowledgement for Jackie. ‘Shauna, look at me.’ She eased off of Shauna’s clit, slowing her movements but maintaining pressure. Shauna moaned, high and reedy. Jackie tugged at her hair with her free hand. Shauna finally pulled back to look at her. “Good,” Jackie whispered, rewarding her by picking up the pace again and, between that and being called *good*, Shauna couldn’t help but let her eyes fall closed for just a second. Apparently, a second too long. “Shauna,” Jackie said firmly, “are you listening to me?” This time rather than letting up, she pressed harder, doubling down on her efforts.

“Ye—yes,” Shauna whimpered.

She could feel Jackie everywhere. She could smell her perfume and her sweat and her hair. She could hear her voice, as though amplified through a megaphone. Looking at her, on top of all of that, was too much. It was sensory overload. Shauna let her head fall back against the wall with a thud and screwed her eyes shut. *Fuck.*

Jackie stopped all movement. Shauna whimpered and wiggled her hips, trying to force Jackie to continue. *Fucking fuck.*

Jackie pressed closer to kiss Shauna's neck, her lips closing just below her ear. "I want you to look at me," she said. She pulled away—one hand still where Shauna needed her, just barely ghosting over her, the other planted firmly on the wall next to Shauna's head, enveloping her, boxing her in.

Shauna forced herself to look at Jackie. Her lips were swollen and her eyes were dark, her chest rising and falling with quick breaths, her pretty face flushed. She was so fucking beautiful. Shauna cupped her jaw, stroking soft, warm skin with her thumb.

"I'm here," she said. It came out hoarse and husky, with much more emotion than she was used to hearing in her own voice.

Jackie smiled triumphantly. "Good girl," she said softly. "Now, keep listening to me."

"*Oh.*" Shauna gave a small nod, feeling electric heat shoot through her body at Jackie's words. Jackie circled her clit again, quicker and harder than she had before. Shauna couldn't help but let her head fall back against the wall once more, but she kept her face at an angle that allowed her to lock eyes with Jackie. "Oh my G—" Shauna cut herself off with a gasp, intense pressure building in her abdomen.

She'd never gotten to the edge this quickly before. Not with Jeff, not with Adam, not with any of her one night stands. She'd imagined this so many times—times she was touching herself, and times they were touching her—and, when she'd finished, it had been Jackie she was thinking about. Jackie's lips. Jackie's fingers. Jackie's tongue. *Jackie* she was falling apart for. She'd had years of foreplay leading up to this moment, and she was more than ready for the real thing.

Jackie grinned at her, hair falling into her eyes. Shauna slipped her hand off of Jackie's jaw to brush the stray hairs back. Jackie slipped a finger inside of her and bent it just right. Shauna panted, bucking her hips under Jackie's fingers. *Jackie's fingers,* fucking hell.

Jackie rested her forehead against Shauna's. "Shauna," she purred, sweet and slow.

"Ye—yes," Shauna knew to answer quickly this time. She'd learned her lesson. She didn't want the pressure to stop building.

"If we're going to do this—" Jackie thrust a second finger into her. Shauna's legs shook uncontrollably. Jackie just gripped her waist with her free hand and pinned her against the wall with her body, holding her upright, before continuing, "—again, then you have to be mine. As in *I'm* the only one who touches you. I'm the only one who fucks you. Can you do that, baby?"

Shauna wanted nothing more in the world than to belong to Jackie Taylor. There were a million things she wanted to say—sweeping statements of love and devotion—but Jackie's fingers were pistoning in and out of her at a blinding speed and her thumb was working her clit better than anyone ever had before and Shauna didn't have access to the language center of her fucking brain. She nodded and groaned.

"I've earned you," Jackie finished, voice barely above a whisper. She pressed her lips to Shauna's cheek, just shy of the corner of her mouth, exactly like she had in the motel. The

juxtaposition—Jackie's roughness and her tenderness all at once, her wanting to *own* Shauna, to possess her—had Shauna reeling. She was dizzy with pleasure. She was so, so close.

"Yes," she panted, planting her face in the crook of Jackie's neck. "Yes, yes, *yes!"*

"Yes what?" Jackie was panting with her. Her voice was thick; it sounded as though she were past turned on and onto desperate, but it also held an edge of genuine, nervous curiousity.

Shauna knew what she was asking for. At least she hoped she did, because Shauna wanted to give Jackie whatever she needed. She let herself gasp and whimper a few more times, until she could force out words through the waves of pleasure wracking her body.

"I'm—I'm yours, Jackie," she chanted, all breath. "I'm yours, I'm yours, I'm yours, I'm—oh *God* —I'm yours!"

She had never said truer words.

"Fuck, baby." Jackie moaned as if she was the one being fucked, and Shauna cried out, the pressure finally breaking. She clenched hard around Jackie's fingers, and Jackie stilled them inside her, but kept circling her clit gently as she rode it out.

Shauna whimpered, her legs and arms shaking, and clung to Jackie as though someone might try to take her away—arms around her neck, chest pressed to hers, one leg snaked around her hip, pulling her closer. Jackie kept holding her by the waist, planting occasional soft kisses on her neck. Once Shauna had stopped shaking and regained control of her breathing, she threaded both hands through Jackie's hair and tugged on it, pulling her back to get a good look at her. Jackie smiled sweetly, her lids heavy.

"Oh my *God,"* Shauna managed. She cut off Jackie's chuckle with a feverish kiss, and backed her toward the bed. She felt Jackie smile against her when there was nowhere further to go, and slid her hands under Jackie's shirt in response, her fingers brushing just beneath her bra. Jackie raised her arms, breaking their kiss just long enough for Shauna to lift her shirt over her head, before slamming their lips back together. Shauna groaned into her mouth, reaching for the clasp of her bra and undoing it in one smooth motion. She broke the kiss to take her in—no room for embarrassment, no room for self-doubt, just an open seizing of this, the greatest turn in her luck. 'Fuck,' she said. "You're so beautiful."

She worked her lips down Jackie's neck, her hands digging hard into either side of her waist to ground herself.

"Mmmm," Jackie hummed, reaching between them to undo the buttons on Shauna's blouse and shove it off of her shoulders. Shauna felt a sharp surge of uneasiness as Jackie went for her bra. It's not that she didn't want Jackie to touch her—fuck, did she ever—she just wasn't exactly sure that Jackie would like what she saw after twenty-five years of change. Shauna focused on kissing Jackie's neck, sucking on her pulse point, and tried to ignore her nerves. Mercifully, she forgot all about them when Jackie slipped her bra off, letting it fall to the floor between them, and immediately cupped her breasts. Jackie looked at her with hungry eyes, boldly taking in her body. "*God,* Shauna."

Shauna felt a blush creep up into her cheeks, every inch of her burning hot. Jackie had somehow managed to take control of the situation again and Shauna didn't mind it—she

found it hot, actually—but she was surprised. All their youthful encounters were typically spent following Shauna's lead: Shauna pushing further, Shauna looking at Jackie like she was God's gift to man. Shauna was pulled out of her thoughts when Jackie, who'd been kissing her way gently down Shauna's chest, took one nipple into her mouth and one between her fingers, sucking and pinching hard at the same time.

"Fu-uck!" Shauna reflexively leaned into Jackie's touch. Jackie looked up at her, her pretty mouth still latched onto her breast. Shauna shuddered and ran a shaky hand through her long hair. Jackie pushed Shauna's already unbuttoned jeans down her legs as far as she could reach without stopping her efforts. Shauna kicked them off and placed her hand at the base of Jackie's skull, lifting her up gently. Jackie released her nipple with a small pop and smiled, looking curious. "Lay down," Shauna said.

Jackie bit her lip as she climbed up on the bed, working her way backwards, tossing a pillow to the side when it got in her way. She leaned back on her elbows and watched Shauna carefully as she climbed in after her. Shauna unbuttoned Jackie's pants, and Jackie lifted her hips for her. Shauna slid them down slowly—taking in her thighs, her knees, her calves as she went—and set them aside. She shot up to the head of the bed, covering Jackie's body with her own and kissing her hard. Jackie's elbows slipped out from under her, and her head hit the mattress as their tongues clashed, their chests pressed together. Jackie bit down hard on Shauna's lower lip, holding it between her teeth for a moment, even as Shauna pulled away. Shauna broke the kiss anyway, smirking at Jackie, who pouted up at her sweetly.

Shauna began to work her way down Jackie's body. She'd been with women a couple times. She'd always had phases of chasing casual sex. She'd enjoyed the exhilaration of cheating, followed by the numbness she achieved when she fucked men that weren't her husband. But she left her trysts with women more heartbroken than numb—her mind on Jackie, always. So, while she wasn't a complete novice—she and Jackie had enjoyed their fair share of this as well, though if they ended in orgasm it was from grinding on each other or, very occasionally when they were feeling bold, touching each other over their clothes—she was in no way experienced the way Jackie certainly was. She could feel the heat of comparison rising in her chest: wondering what Jackie would think of her, if she'd be good enough for her, if Jackie might judge her technique or her enthusiasm.

She pushed it down hard, instead opting to look at Jackie like this—her arms flat on the bed, bent up at the elbow so that they framed either side of her head, her hair fanned out around her like a halo, her lips pulled back in an already-satisfied smile, her chest still rising and falling rapidly, her tan skin and her rosy peaked nipples, her body completely open and exposed to Shauna, other than thin purple underwear that were dark at the center.

Shauna's mind was wiped of her previous anxieties. All she could think about, all that mattered in this world, was getting her mouth on Jackie. She started at her collarbone, planting open-mouthed kisses from one side to the other. Her hands ran up and down Jackie's sides, possessive and insistent. She moved lower when Jackie sighed gently, flicking her tongue against one of her nipples.

"Shauna!" Jackie's hands were quick to tangle in Shauna's hair, urging her closer. Shauna took her nipple between her lips, sucking it into her mouth. Jackie bucked her hips up so hard they bumped into Shauna's. Shauna smiled against her skin and trailed light kisses down her stomach. When she reached Jackie's navel, Jackie stroked her hair with fingers so soft it made

Shauna suddenly emotional, near tearful. She hummed against soft skin, acknowledging Jackie's touch, and ran her tongue just above the line of Jackie's underwear, her fingers hooked on either side of them. Jackie's breath hitched, and when Shauna glanced up at her she was nodding. Shauna peeled them off and settled on her stomach between Jackie's legs, finally where she needed to be.

"Fuck," Shauna breathed. Jackie was so wet she could see it before she even nudged her knees all the way apart. She took a few deep, shuddering breaths, taking her in. She inched forward, tracing her tongue up just once—slow, savoring, cementing for herself that this was real, this was Jackie, this was what *Jackie* tasted like. Jackie's hips flew open wider. She made desperate little noises that sent more heat straight to Shauna's gut. Shauna buried her face in Jackie's thigh, overwhelmed. "So pretty," she said, turning her cheek to lock eyes with Jackie.

Jackie whimpered in a way that Shauna had never heard before—not from her, not from anyone else. The noise prompted her to press a kiss right to Jackie's center, coating her lips with her before teasing her entrance with her tongue. Jackie's head fell back, her breathing starting to sound more like irregular gasping. Shauna had been imaging this for so fucking long. *Exactly* this. Tasting Jackie, mouth and tongue all over her, Jackie whining and moaning and rutting her hips against her face. She drew circles against Jackie's clit with her tongue until Jackie's moans went guttural, then she closed her lips and sucked. Jackie screamed, her legs flying up and to wrap around Shauna's neck, ankles crossed behind her back. After a length of time that Shauna could not have quantified—other than to say that it didn't feel long enough, that it barely made a dent in the minutes, hours, days, weeks that Shauna felt she needed to spend buried in Jackie to make up for lost time—Jackie's thighs began to quake uncontrollably.

She chanted Shauna's name like a prayer, her hips stuttering without rhythm. The motion was causing Jackie to move away from her, so Shauna reached up beneath her thighs and clamped her hands down on top of them to hold Jackie firmly to her mouth. She rode out the sporadic movements with her. Jackie's legs kept snapping shut, like she was trying to clap her knees together, her thighs knocking and sticking against Shauna's ears and cheeks. Jackie, who'd been beautifully vocal up until that point, took one more sharp breath in and arched her back off the bed. She gripped the sheets with one hand and Shauna's hair with the other. The quake that had begun in her thighs moved to seize the rest of her body, as she squeezed so tight around Shauna's head she couldn't have breathed if she wanted to. Shauna kept sucking until Jackie's trembing slowed, until she slammed her legs back down to the bed and ran her hands gently through Shauna's hair.

Shauna smiled shyly, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "Was that okay?"

"Was that okay? Oh my God, yes." Jackie sat and pulled Shauna up, so that she was on her knees between Jackie's legs. 'I don't react like that for nothing, baby.' She drew her hands up and down Shauna's ribs. "You're so fucking gorgeous, Shauna."

Shauna could feel more wetness pooling in her underwear at being praised, at being called *baby*, and tried to calm herself. Her feelings seemed to be visible though, because Jackie was grinning at her mischievously, her hands grazing her hips. Shauna leaned down to kiss her. Jackie slipped her fingers further, lighting grazing Shauna's center as though testing her. Shauna moaned into her mouth and Jackie pulled away, raising an eyebrow.

“We don’t—you don’t have to, uh… go again.” Shauna lost steam, as Jackie lightly circled her clit over the thin cotton. Jackie continued to grin at her, holding her eye contact, as she slid Shauna’s soaking panties off. “—it was just… getting to… getting to do that got me a little—”

Jackie cut her off with a quick kiss. She slipped a hand between Shauna’s thighs and nudged at one, prompting Shauna to spread them enough for her to slip her own legs between them. Jackie grabbed her ass firmly. She laid flat on her back, and pulled Shauna toward her.

“Come here, beautiful,” she said.

“What?” Shauna asked, dazed.

“Come—” Jackie repeated, lifting her head off of the bed to better stare at Shauna. She urged her ass forward with one hand again, lightly smacking it with the other. “—here.”

It clicked for Shauna when Jackie licked her lips. She obeyed, inching forward on her knees, but she stopped short, hovering over Jackie’s chest, feeling vulnerable, suddenly terrified that she’d somehow misunderstood.

“Hey,” Jackie said, her tone far softer. “Only if you want to.”

Her low, raspy voice and her flushed chest and her pretty eyes worked in tandem to overwhelm Shauna’s senses, but it was watching Jackie’s tongue dart out to lick her lips again that really pushed her over the edge. She moaned, thread her fingers through Jackie’s hair and made a fist.

“I don’t think there’s a world in which I say no to sitting on your face,” she said, before she could censor herself, her own voice a touch gravelly.

Jackie raised an eyebrow, an adorable flash of surprise crossing her features before she turned to bite Shauna’s thigh lightly. “Here. Now,” she growled, roughly pulling Shauna forward and down so that she had no option but to hover over Jackie’s face, inches from her mouth.

Jackie closed the distance and immediately sucked Shauna’s clit between her lips, slipping two fingers into her at the same time. And this—well, *this* was something that Shauna had never felt before. She could still taste Jackie on her lips, her body was still recovering from her first orgasm, and Jackie was unbelievably *good* at this. Jackie was here, and Jackie was fucking her, and Jackie was sweet on her tongue, and *holy fucking shit.*

Shauna whined high in her throat in a way that might’ve embarrassed her, had she any wherewithal to care. Though she’d made peace with the noises that Jackie was drawing out of her, she was trying to control her movements, worried that she might crush Jackie somehow. Jackie seemed to know what she was worried about, because she grabbed her hip roughly with her free hand, rocking her back and forth to let her know that she could thrust her hips. It was so familiar, so like what they’d done when they were young and a make-out session had gone further, one girl sensing the other bucking her hips a little and grabbing them, slamming them forward to tell her that she could grind into her lap if she wanted to.

Shauna whimpered and moved against Jackie’s face. Jackie’s feet were planted on the bed, her knees up and her hips slightly open. Shauna reached behind herself, stabilizing her position with one hand on Jackie’s stomach, and slipped two fingers into her without thinking

too hard about it. She was rewarded with a muffled scream from Jackie. Shauna felt herself hurtling toward the edge. She grasped Jackie's hair—still leaning back to curl her fingers inside of her, pressing her palm hard against her clit, not willing to stop fucking her now that she'd started—and yanked Jackie's head down while lifting her hips a few inches. They came apart with a wet, smacking noise that made Shauna groan. Jackie looked up at her, confused, and rocked her hips against Shauna's movements.

"Do you love me?" Shauna asked, panting.

Her hips were still jerking, uncontrollable shocks of pleasure surging through her. Jackie's eyes went soft. She looked so beautiful, maybe the prettiest Shauna had ever seen her, with her lips even more swollen and her mascara smudged around her eyes, a sheen of sweat across her brow. She moaned once more, then she slipped her fingers out of Shauna and reached down, wrapping a hand around Shauna's wrist gently, prompting her to freeze her own movements. She studied Shauna intently.

"I love you, Shauna."

Shauna whimpered and dropped her hips back down, riding Jackie so close she had no room to slide her fingers back inside. Shauna curled her fingers hard inside Jackie, and Jackie gripped Shauna's hips, pressing her even closer. She finished quickly, with Jackie's words echoing in her ears. The noises she made were somewhere between gasps and sobs, and her body felt like it was on fire. She went dizzy and flushed with pleasure, immediately, twitching with it. When she couldn't take it anymore, she lifted her hips up and away, and she kept fucking Jackie until she got to watch her come undone beneath her, feeling powerful and wonderful and so fucking painfully in love.

They showered together, after, Shauna taking in every second of it gratefully. She'd never felt right doing this with Jeff, always felt awkward and embarrassed, thought this level of intimacy just wasn't her. But there she was, laughing under the water with Jackie, wiping the makeup off of her face for her. She was so fucking blissfully happy. It was insane, and she knew it. Complicated, and she knew it. But she couldn't find it in herself to care. She had what she'd been wanting for the majority of her life, and she was going to take as much of it as she could get.

They slipped back into bed together, each of them in one of Shauna's oversized tee shirts. Jackie looked so sweet, doe-eyed and smiling shyly, as if she hadn't just fucked Shauna senseless. Soemthing clawed at Shauna—never fully satisfied, she thought with a rush of self-loathing. But she couldn't handle wondering if the things they'd said to each other had just been heat of the moment, sweet-nothings bullshit. She must've worn her nerves on her face, because a little flicker of concern crossed Jackie's eyes.

"Hey," she said, "what are you thinking?"

Shauna took Jackie's hand, lacing their fingers together, before bending at the elbow and raising their arms up so they were hovering in the air. They pushed and pulled playfully, neither breaking eye contact.

“I meant it,” Shauna answered softly. “Everything I said. Last night and just now. I want us to… be together, Jackie. Like really together. Just us. I mean… I don’t—I’m not trying to say—I’m not, um, *defining* it. I know we have a lot to work through, but I want you to know that I’m going to leave him no matter what. And… if you still want me, I want you to be my… whatever it is we decide on.”

Jesus, Shauna, smooth.

Jackie didn’t skip a beat. “Yes.”

“Yes?” Shauna repeated.

“Yes. I want to be your *whatever*, Shauna.” Jackie brought Shauna’s hand to her lips and kissed it three quick times in a row, grinning cheekily at her. “I will *gladly* be your whatever, and truthfully I won’t be accepting anything less.”

Shauna laughed, easily enamored by Jackie co-opting the word *whatever* , making it cute rather than awkward—charming Jackie, as always. “I love you,” she whispered. “So much. It’s always been you.”

“I love you, too. You’ve *always* been my world.” Jackie pouted sweetly. “But don’t make me cry right now.”

Shauna gave a watery chuckle and Jackie pulled her close, planting a kiss on the crown of her head. They’d barely settled in when Shauna’s phone rang. She groaned as Jackie reached for it.

“Nat,” Jackie sighed. “Guess we’ve got to get dressed.”

6. pink in your cheeks

"Hey," Jackie said, trailing her fingers down Shauna's forearm. Her voice and her touch were so soft it was almost suspicious, reminding Shauna of batted lashes and pouty lips and *please, Shipman* . Jackie's fingers stopped at Shauna's wrist, wrapping around it loosely. Her touches had always felt so intentional—stirring Shauna up until she was a hurricane in a glass, shaking her until she was fizzy, settling her back to still waters with a single caress. "Don't take this the wrong way, yeah?"

The parking lot had been near empty when they'd pulled in. Shauna had parked next to Van's car, and Jackie had immediately turned to her, something clearly on her mind. Time hadn't eclipsed Shauna's awareness of Jackie's tiniest movements. (Not in small part because Shauna had been imagining her in the years since, never allowing for a full gap in their dynamic on her end, but Shauna couldn't think too hard about that without her mind going fuzzy around the edges.) Jackie had been thinking as Shauna had driven, percolating on something, formulating the best way to bring it up. Shauna had known Jackie would speak the second she turned the key in the ignition.

Shauna raised a brow in question. Jackie didn't elaborate.

"I can't take it any kind of way if you don't tell me what it is," Shauna said.

Jackie sighed, slipping her hand lower to trap Shauna's fingers between her own. "You take Nat back, and I'll take Van. Or I'll take them both, if you want." Not exactly the sudden expression of regret that Shauna had been fearful of; no *I take it back* or *I've changed my mind.* Tension eased out of Shauna's shoulders. "But you and Van are *not* getting into a car together when I had to physically separate you a few hours ago, yeah?"

"With the way she's been talking to me, I'm shockingly just fine with not chauffeuring her," Shauna said. Jackie smiled, scrunching her nose in surprise. "I'll take Nat."

Van and Nat pushed their way through the double doors of the dingy highway dive and headed toward them, Nat's arm wrapped loosely around Van's shoulders. They looked closer to hammered than Shauna would've preferred. Shauna made to open the door and hop out, but Jackie grabbed her arm suddenly.

"You okay?" Shauna turned to Jackie. Her eyes were wide and searching, her lip was pulled between her teeth.

"Yeah, I just…" Jackie trailed off, but clutched Shauna's arm in an even firmer grip. She was hard to read—pensive at best, distressed at worst. "Nothing."

There was no way in hell it was nothing, and Shauna wasn't going to be able to function until Jackie spilled.

"Are you freaking out?" Shauna blurted—a little too loudly, a little too quickly—before she could stop herself.

"No!" Jackie matched her frantic energy. "Are you?"

“No.” Shauna shook her head. “I mean, I don’t think so?”

“Oh my God!” Jackie unbuckled her seatbelt, turning her entire body toward Shauna. “You are freaking out.”

“No!” Shauna snapped back. “I’m just… processing.”

“Oh my God,” Jackie groaned, releasing Shauna’s arm.

“This is a lot, Jackie!” Shauna placed a hand on Jackie’s thigh—safe territory, near her knee. Timid, suddenly, about crossing a line, even though less than an hour ago she’d been in much more intimate places. ‘I thought you were dead not too long ago, remember?’ Jackie buried her face in her hands. “Hey!” Shauna tugged on her wrists until she could see her face. “You’re the one who started this conversation. I’m not freaking out. I promise.”

“I didn’t even get to start a conversation,” Jackie whined. “You just assumed, which means it must be on your mind.”

“I’m just… I was guessing, okay?” Shauna palmed Jackie’s cheek. Her damp hair tickled the back of Shauna’s hand.

“Yeah,” Jackie said, “just—”

Three sharp knocks on the windshield. Van was leaning over the hood of the car to dangle her keys in front of them. Nat stood chuckling a few feet behind her.

“Fuck,” Shauna mumbled. She reached for the door handle, but—

“Shauna!” Jackie demanded. Shauna whipped around, her eyes wide, her mouth open to ask what the *hell* was going on. She didn’t get a chance, though, because Jackie grabbed her face and kissed her—firm and sudden, just as she had that first time, the afternoon before. Nat booed audibly, and Jackie broke away. “I’ll drive Van’s car. You stay, take Nat. And I’m *not* freaking out,” she insisted.

“Okay.” Shauna brushed her hair behind her ear and nodded. “Then I’m not freaking out, either.”

“Come *on,”* Van cupped her hands around her mouth to yell. “Can we get a move on, here?”

“Looks like you got laid,” Nat sighed, sinking into the passenger seat.

Shauna had been correct in her assessment: Natalie and Van were just shy of belligerently drunk.

“It does, does it?” Shauna asked, hardly paying Nat any attention, her mind already wandering back to Jackie.

“Well, it’s the middle of the day and you both have wet hair and different clothes on,” Nat said. “So, I’d say *yeah.”*

“You’re feeling pretty observant then, huh?” Shauna pulled out of the parking lot, watching as Jackie swung out behind them. “Are you going to join Misty’s internet detective

thing?"

Shauna couldn't shake the anxiety of being apart from Jackie, even with her in eyeline. It was almost enough to distract her completely from the anxiety of what had just happened between them. *Almost.*

Nat snorted. "I think we do enough *detecting* in our own lives." She stretched her arms above her head, craning her neck to the side. 'I don't know how you swung that one,' she added. "I really don't."

Shauna split her gaze between the road in front of her and Jackie's car in her rearview. "Swung what one?"

"Prom queen," Nat said. "What, you shacking up with someone else already?"

"I don't either." Shauna's whisper was barely audible, but Nat heard everything. Long months of hunting, listening for prey too scarce and predators too abundant.

Nat sat up straight and gawked at Shauna. "What? No sarcastic comment? No deflection? Is this… is this a heart to heart with *the* Shauna Shipman?" She clutched her chest dramatically.

Shauna felt a pang at the use of her maiden name. She sighed, glancing in the rearview again. Jackie was still following, but not close enough that she could really make out her face. She could see it in her mind's eye, of course, but she was still processing how Jackie looked now. It was amorphous—her teen apparition and the beautiful, present, real Jackie—and Shauna was itching to look at her. She needed to see her to ground herself in reality. (In what she hoped with every fiber of her being was fucking reality, in this thing that she'd never let go of—grown Jackie, sweet Jackie, living Jackie, touching and holding and fucking her. Loving her.)

Shauna forced her attention back to Nat. "I wouldn't dare dream of asking you for a heart to heart. I'm just answering your question."

"Well, we've got fifteen minutes to kill and the radio is shit out here." Nat tapped her fingers against the stereo. "So… do you love her?"

"Yes," Shauna answered without hesitation. One of the few questions that she didn't have to search for an answer to. There was no filter of who she wanted to be or who she once was that needed applying. It was a truth so solid there was never any denying it. Shauna loved Jackie, past and present and future tense.

"Good, that was the easy question." Nat smiled conspiratorially. "Are you going to break her heart?"

Shauna laughed, surprised. Tears pricked in her eyes. "I really don't plan to."

"That isn't an answer," Nat challenged. Her expression was light—a smile that lit her face up, one that she used to wear in the locker room or out on the field. It wasn't accusatory. It was Natalie sitting in genuine curiosity. It made sense; Jackie being around to have a relationship with at all was a novelty.

"I don't know." Shauna braked for a stop sign, waiting an extra beat to catch a glimpse of Jackie's face in the mirror. Her racing heart slowed.

"That's closer to an answer," Nat said.

A moment of silence crossed between them. Shauna could feel Nat's eyes on her. "Is this twenty questions?" she asked.

"It's how ever many questions I ask, until I decide I don't want to know anymore." Nat rolled her window down a crack, and crisp, cool air rushed in. Shauna breathed deep, the chill filling her lungs, pressing in on her chest.

"Oh, of course." Shauna rolled her eyes halfheartedly. 'The lesser known version.' The truth that Shauna didn't care to admit, even to herself, was that she was almost glad to be having the conversation. It made everything that'd happened in the past few days feel more solid, realer somehow, to talk about it without Jackie there, to hear Nat snicker and badger and question. "Are you going to ask if she's going to break my heart?"

"You can't answer that one, my *dear,"* Nat drew out her words, existing in that particular liminal space between biting and sympathetic she inhabited best.

"Right." Shauna ran a hand through her hair. Her ring finger caught on a knot that'd come from toweling it dry too roughly, overly eager to get back into bed with Jackie after they'd showered.

"You know, I really thought—when we were out there, I mean—I thought, *man.* This girl feels so much regret. Seriously, the fucking poster child for regret. That's what you were." Nat paused, lifting her purse off the floor and dropping it in her lap. 'Couldn't understand why you'd let a man like Jeff ruin something so good. Thought you were sort of a bitch for it all. Didn't know why people gave you such a pass about it.' She pulled a fresh pack of cigarettes out, yanking the plastic tab until she could tear the sleeve away. "But, once she was… gone, I didn't doubt you loved her. L—O—V—E, love. The big leagues. I was shocked you didn't manage to Romeo and Juliet yourself. Wow," Nat snorted, tilting her head to the side in thought, "and it would've been a real Romeo and Juliet, huh? Since she was actually alive?" She popped a cigarette between her lips and started digging through her bag again.

"Natalie," Shauna said, "the point, please."

"Right, well. Like I said. I got it, then." Nat's voice was muffled as she spoke around the cigarette. She found her lighter, brandishing it in triumph. "What I didn't get was when you came home and married him. That was sick. Like, you were just… spitting on her fucking grave."

"Are you seriously going to smoke in here?" Shauna asked. "It isn't even my car."

"I'll deal with the prom queen when we get back." Natalie said, lighting up.

Glowing orange, the thick smell of tobacco filling the car, because the window wasn't down nearly far enough for the smoke to clear as Nat exhaled. Shauna wanted to snatch it from between her fingers and bring it to her own greedy lips. She'd smoked, when they first got back. Four months of that little hit of relief every three hours, like clockwork, until she'd realized that she was rewarding herself. It wasn't just numbing the pain for a few moments, like pills or booze. There was no hangover. Smoking hadn't made her do stupid shit that hurt her more in the long run. It'd just made her feel good. She'd quit cold turkey.

“So, you’re done with the twenty questions, then?” Shauna glanced at Nat. “Is this just a lecture, now?”

“Nope,” Nat said. “Think of the lecture as a nice interlude. Why’d you marry him?”

Shauna sighed. She rolled Nat’s window down further. Nat frowned at her.

Fuck it.

“He was there, and he felt guilty, and I needed to pretend to be normal. He let me. I wasn’t going to… make it in the world,” Shauna said. Nat ashed out the window, the movement of the dull glow catching Shauna’s eye. “Couldn’t work, couldn’t even talk to people. I cried all the time. I was angry all the time. I… thought about her all the time. She’s all I thought about.”

Nah took a drag, digesting Shauna’s answer. “Yeah. I get that, I guess. What I don’t get is how you and Jackie fell right back into it,” Nat said, her voice laced with genuine curiosity. “Was she not mad? Were *you* not mad?”

“We were… both a little mad.” *A little mad.* Screaming at each other until the neighbors banged on the wall, frustrated tears welling in their eyes, a fierce pain that still ripped through Shauna’s chest. It didn’t matter, though. Anger wouldn’t give them back what they’d lost. Anger was playing with fire. They couldn’t afford it.

Nat nodded. “If you told me it was just crazy, pent up anger sex with you two, I could see that. But it isn’t, right? I mean… she’s flirting with you and backing you up in arguments and just, like… being her old self with you. So how the fuck did you do that?” Nat sounded indignant, like she was sure Shauna was keeping some great secret from her.

“I didn’t *do* anything. Not intentionally, at least. I have no idea how it got like this. It just… did.” Shauna checked the rearview again. Jackie’s was still at a close distance. “I’ll do anything she wants me to, Nat.”

“Don’t you wonder why?” Nat’s voice was calmer. Distant. “She had… all those years to decide she wanted you, and it really seems like she does, so don’t you wonder why she didn’t cave sooner?”

This wasn’t really about Shauna and Jackie anymore. Not fully.

“I really don’t know.” Shauna considered telling Nat about their argument in the motel, about Jackie’s *stockholm syndrome* comment, about how she’d operated under the impression that Shauna hated her. Nat hadn’t witnessed their fight the night Jackie had gone into the cold. She’d heard about it, but Shauna had no idea how much she knew. That entire time was a blur, especially when it came to Jackie.

“You going to ask her?” Nat said.

“I think so. I think… I have to, right? I just don’t want it to end.” Hot tears stung at Shauna’s eyes, but she blinked them back rapidly. She wasn’t going to cry in front of Natalie. “I don’t want her to panic or… or think I’m angry.”

“Then don’t get angry,” Nat said, shaking her head. ‘People don’t just think you’re mad for no reason, Shauna.’ Shauna bobbed her chin once—if she spoke she might sob, if she started she may never stop. “Van said she isn’t surprised. She thinks you two have, like, mutual brain

damage. Like, when you see each other you just stop thinking." Nat tapped her forehead, side-eyeing Shauna with a grin.

Shauna smiled back. "Yeah, well, I can't say I'm surprised that's her take. Did she, uh, say anything else?"

"Believe it or not, you were *not* our main topic of conversation." Nat blew smoke directly in Shauna's face and chuckled when Shauna scrunched her nose and batted it away, cracking her own window. (For show, of course, because Shauna wanted nothing more than to suck the smoke down like they were trading blowbacks, the way she and Jackie used to in some asshole's basement with a bong and a lighter, searching for a reason to get close.)

"I think, if I were her, I would've done the same thing," Nat said gently, looking out the window. "I think she can't help but love you when she has you. Whether she wants to or not."

Shauna couldn't go down that path. She couldn't question that shit yet. She was barely treading water as it was, and she felt like another five minutes spent without Jackie at her side might genuinely fucking kill her. So, no, Shauna couldn't wonder if Jackie truly wanted her or if it was some fucked up trauma response. She couldn't, she couldn't, *she couldn't.*

"Why are you even having this conversation with me, Nat?" Shauna snapped. "You don't even like me. You've made that pretty fucking clear."

"I like her. She was sort of a cunt sometimes, but I get her now." Nat shrugged. "And I liked you a hell of a lot better when she was around." She jostled Shauna's shoulder.

"Yeah," Shauna said softly. "Me too."

Nat finished her smoke and flicked it out the window. "I don't hate you, you know. I think I just… I never got you. I still don't get you. But… if someone I loved came back from the dead… I'd probably want someone to, like, fucking ask about it. So, I asked."

"Thank you." Shauna's breathing sped up, her eyes hot with unshed tears, yet again.

"Don't get weepy on me." Nat leaned away theatrically. "I'm mostly satisfying my own curiosity."

"Sorry." Shauna let a moment pass. "Nat?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm really sorry you lost him."

"Me too."

Nat and Van sprang out of their respective passenger seats so quickly it was hard to determine whether they'd even allowed the cars to be put into park before flinging open their doors. The speed with which they hurried toward the house made it seem as though they were leaving Shauna and Jackie alone in the driveway on purpose, like they might have spoken a little more about the two of them between shots than Nat had let on.

Shauna ran her fingers across the sleek black exterior of Jackie's car as she exited, and felt herself on her way to forgetting the chipped red of her own. Jackie was already leaning against the bed of Van's truck, her hands buried in her pockets.

"Do you think we're being crazy?" she asked quickly, the way she did always had when she was trying not to lose her nerve. 'Do you think this,' she waved a hand between them, "what we're doing is, like, completely insane?"

"I mean…" Shauna moved closer to Jackie. She paused a few feet short of where she'd like to be, unsure of how much space Jackie might need, unwilling, as she'd found herself so frequently these past few days, to risk scaring her off. "Yeah. Probably."

"Okay. Okay, me too." Jackie chewed her lip. "Do you want to like… *keep* being insane or __"

"Absolutely," Shauna said, grinning. "Without a fucking doubt."

"Okay. Okay, yeah," Jackie said, her smile saccharine, sheepish, schoolgirl, something Shauna's wandering, fractured mind had never been able to recapture, something that warmed her straight through.

Shauna shifted to where she wanted to be, resting her weight against the car, her side pressed snug against Jackie's. "We're going to figure it out," she said. "It'll get less insane."

Jackie raised a brow. "You think so?" Her eyes found Shauna's lips for half a second, before she caught herself.

"I don't know." Shauna shrugged. "Seems like it would. Do you?"

"I guess I'm trying to decide if I even care, because…" Jackie sighed, and for the first time Shauna could tell, could *feel*, that it was all satisfaction, with no worrisome hint of exasperation. "Because when I'm looking at you, it sort of feels like I don't."

Shauna nodded. "Me too."

"Think that's bad?" Jackie asked.

It was Shauna's turn to watch Jackie's lips as she spoke, taking in the familiar way they curved around words, the unfamiliar lines that pulled at them as they did so. "Only one way we're going to find out," she said.

"*You* are a little bit of a sweet talker." Jackie rolled her eyes, pressing her lips together to bite back another smile.

"Okay now that," Shauna wrapped her arms around Jackie's waist, pulling her close, "is insane."

Jackie settled her arms around Shauna's neck. "I didn't mean to like… *lock you down.* When I said what I said, earlier. I meant that I… I can't have you like that halfway. I won't do it. But… if you don't want me like that, it doesn't mean I'm walking out of your life. I can be just your friend."

Shauna squeezed Jackie closer, reveling in the way her breath hitched as their bodies pressed together. "I don't think we've ever been just friends," she said. "I think when we tried

to pretend we were, that's where everything went wrong."

Jackie gave a small nod. "But I *can* do it. If that's what you want," she repeated, searching Shauna's eyes.

"Jackie," Shauna said firmly. "That's not what I want."

Jackie pressed her forehead to Shauna's temple, and Shauna swept a hand, low and firm, against the back of her hip.

"Do you remember when we used to dance like this?" Jackie whispered.

"I remember it all," Shauna said, swaying her just barely, moving with the gentle push of the wind that had begun to kick up around them.

"See?" Jackie giggled, the lightest Shauna had heard her since she'd returned. "Sweet talker."

Meddling Misty Quigley gave Shauna absolutely no time to transition. There was no extricating herself from Jackie and stepping into the house slowly, allowing the chaos of the others to filter in gradually. She couldn't just sit with Jackie for a moment, or grab them something to drink, or even say hi to Taissa. It was immediate.

"Misty," Lottie whined, trailing in behind her. "I *really* think this is a horrible idea."

"It's important, Lottie." Misty shrugged off her coat—lavender with over-large buttons, something a kindergarten teacher might wear. "No more secrets. That's what we said."

"I'm not sure *that's* what we said, exactly," Nat said. She kicked her feet up on the coffee table and interlaced her hands behind her neck, sinking deeper into the boring, beige sofa.

"Tai," Misty said. Tai froze, one shoe off and one shoe on, looking struck by the mention of her name. "I spent part of our lunch reviewing some footage I have. Don't freak out about this, because it was for your safety, but… I hid a camera in one of the trees outside your house."

Lottie groaned, burying her face in her hands.

"Fucking hell," Van muttered under her breath. She left the kitchen, a bottle of water in hand, to sit at Natalie's side.

"You *what?"* Tai spat. Shauna rushed forward to grab her wrist. Tai tried to step closer to Misty, but Shauna held her steady.

"She gets one outside her door, I get two in my fucking bedroom." Nat rolled her eyes. "Thanks a lot, Misty."

Van's face twisted. "Gross, Misty."

"It doesn't matter right now, okay?" Misty said. 'What matters is that I heard Simone talking on the phone to someone. She mentioned finding something… something in your basement.' Misty raised a brow, waiting on a reaction. Shauna felt Jackie hovering at her side, but she kept her eyes locked on the empty space between Misty and Taissa, focused on

keeping it large enough that a stray swing couldn't land. "I couldn't tell *who* she was talking to, which is incredibly troubling, but she told them it was like a shrine and that… well… there's no easy way to say this, but apparently your missing dog's head was the center of it."

"*What?"*

"*Her dog's what?"*

"*—the fuck?"*

Shauna studied Tai silently; she didn't look surprised enough. Shauna's stomach dropped. She risked a glance at Jackie. Her lip was pulled between her teeth and her arms were crossed tight against her chest, but she angled herself toward Shauna, eyeing Misty with concern. Shauna had become a quick study of body language out there. Fuck Maslow's pyramid and Mr. Hussman's tenth grade health class—Shauna's key to staying alive had always been noticing who people aligned themselves with, and recognizing that their allegences could change on a fucking dime. Jackie was on Shauna's team. She had her back, and she'd kept it through a fucking murder confession, so chances were she'd jump in for Tai if—

"And…" Misty pushed forward, verbally and physically. Shauna slid her foot in front of Taissa's. 'She said you've been… increasingly *weird* leading up to the election. So, I called someone on your campaign team, too.' Tai flinched. Shauna tightened her hold. "Pretended to be a student researching *sudden changes in election outcomes* and they told me there was really no explanation for why it swung in your favor." Misty adjusted her glasses gingerly. "You need to tell your team to be less candid with random people, by the way."

"So… so, what, Misty? What the fuck are you saying?" Nat sat forward, snatching the half finished water out of Van's hands and throwing back a quick sip. "Because all I'm getting from this is that those fucking creeps killed Tai's dog to scare her, but it feels like you're trying to—"

"You sacrificed your dog to win the election," Van interrupted, her eyes trained on Tai. "Didn't you?"

Jackie's hand found Shauna's lower back, steadying her.

Tai gulped. "I… I didn't know I was doing it. I was fucking sleepwalking," she said. She took a step backward, and Shauna released her, allowing her to sink down into the armchair behind them. Misty relaxed, satisfied. Lottie and Jackie both seemed anxious, shifting on their feet, but the tension in the room had dissipated with Tai's admission. "But I… I realized when it was already done and… well, I think… I think it worked." Tai's eye's widened, and her hands flew up to cover her mouth, as if she could shove the words back and swallow them down.

"Oh, Tai," Shauna said, sympathetically.

"Oh my God!" Nat yelled. "What the *fuck*, Taissa?"

Lottie began to cry, and it was unclear whether it was because of the slain dog or because of the yelling. Jackie startled, stepping toward Lottie to slip an arm around her shoulders.

"Shauna and Misty both murdered *people!"* Tai raised her voice, just shy of an actual shout—unwilling to be the more unruly one.

“It’s not just the fucking murder!” Nat screeched. “It’s the… the— *fuck.”*

“Rituals,” Van finished, running a shaky hand across her forehead.

That word held power for this group. There was more yelling, more crying, more everything, except control. Things were spinning the fuck out.

Shauna gripped Jackie’s shoulder and brought her lips to her ear. “You okay?” she asked.

Shauna had no idea how much of this Jackie had been exposed to. No idea if she knew just how dark things had gotten. No idea if her reaction was shock or memory.

“Yeah, I just…” Jackie shook her head and squeezed Lottie tighter. Shauna pressed a kiss to her forehead. Jackie leaned into it.

Everyone who had been sitting was once again on their feet, squaring up in various bullshit arguments. Shauna pushed her way to the middle.

“Guys!” she said. Nobody stopped. ‘Calm the fuck down! It isn’t fucking real, it’s never been real!’ she screamed. The room quieted. The only sounds were Lottie crying softly and Jackie hiccupping once, tears running down her cheeks. “It…” Shauna softened, taking in each of their faces. Fear and exhaustion was etched into every single one, reducing them to their base selves, the ones who had lived out there. “It wasn’t real, okay? It’s okay.”

(Shauna hoped that she sounded more sure than she felt. Because, while Shauna typically clung to the belief that what they’d been through had been purely psychological, there was a small, persistent seed of doubt that was always trying to lodge itself between her ribs and take root. A small seed of *faith*, really, which was far more terrifying.)

Shauna had quieted them but, even as she’d spoken, eyes had wandered off of her and onto Lottie. Lottie had curled herself into a chair, her feet tucked beneath her and her knees knocking into its arm, where Jackie had perched herself.

Lottie shook her head quickly. “Don’t look at me! I’ve been through so many… goddamn medications and… and treatments. I have no clue what’s real!”

“Shauna, you killed that rabbit in your garden and served it to your family for dinner,” Tai challenged. “You’re telling me you don’t still sometimes… you know?”

“Yeah, because it was eating my lettuce! I wasn’t practicing fucking witchcraft!” Shauna snapped. She couldn’t take this calmly. Not from Taissa, and certainly not in front of Jackie. “You’re asking if I still *what?* Do *cult shit* for kicks and giggles? No, Tai, I really fucking don’t.”

“Oh, this is fucking insane.” Nat kicked one of the bar stools against the kitchen island. It bounced off and clattered to the ground.

“Shauna?” Van addressed her directly for what Shauna was pretty sure was the first time since she’d arrived. “Do you remember the night you… gave birth out there?”

“Yeah, Van, of course I fucking remember.” Shauna planted a hand on the back of her hip and focused on controlling her shuddering breaths. “What does that have to do with—”

“You almost died. We watched you turn gray. You lost just an… ungodly amount of blood.” Van had the fucking audacity to look haunted, as if she’d had anything to do with it. As if she’d been the one on the shitty old bed, her clothes sticking to her skin where once red blood had dried brown, pain ripping through her like a knife. “It was everywhere. You couldn’t walk through the room without slipping in it. We all knew there was no fucking way you were going to live.”

“Van, please.” Taissa said, her voice was small and broken.

“Why the hell are we doing this?” Shauna demanded. Her legs shook beneath her, her vision darkened at the edges. “Do you hate me that much? You just want to take a break and fucking torture me right now?”

“No, Shauna!” Van said. “Just—just fucking listen, okay?”

Shauna crossed her arms against her chest. Jackie appeared suddenly at her side, but she didn’t reach out to touch her. She simply hovered, unsure.

“You should have died,” Van insisted. “Truly. And then you just… perked up. Like, I cannot emphasize enough how much you looked like a goddamn corpse and then, suddenly… pink in your cheeks again. Someone stop me if I’m getting this wrong.”

“You’re not wrong,” Tai muttered, distant. She’d been with Shauna during her entire labor —held her hand, combed back her hair, been her person. Shauna shifted her focus to a notched dark spot on the hardwood.

“No, you really aren’t,” Misty added carefully. “I didn’t think it should’ve been possible then, but now I really know it isn’t. You just don’t survive that. Not without a blood transfusion.”

“But none of us *did* anything! We didn’t do any seance, sacrifice bullshit,” Nat said. ‘Lottie cut her hand, nothing changed, and she said some stupid shit about the *bond not being strong enough,’* Nat waved her hands through the air mockingly, “and then it was another hour or two before Shauna got better. You all sound fucking insane. Even *if* that shit was possible, no one *did* something at the same time that she—”

“That,” Van said quietly, her blue-green eyes sharp and focused, locked on Jackie, “is where you’re wrong.”

Jackie’s tears had stopped. She stared back at Van, her lips pursed tight, dejected. Then, she sucked air through her teeth and sighed. She tilted her head to the right, hooked her fingers under the collar of her shirt, and tugged it down to the left, so that everyone in the room was staring at the long, jagged scar just beneath her collarbone.

“Whoa,” Nat whispered. She took a quick step backwards, stumbling on the edge of the area rug.

“Holy fuck,” Tai said.

“I’ve been wondering what that was from.” Misty cocked her head to the side in mild curiosity.

“Jackie, I—” Shauna’s cheeks were hot, tears blurring her vision. She squeezed Jackie’s biceps with trembling fingers. Jackie brought her own hands up, catching Shauna’s elbows in

a gentle hold. “You—you—do you believe that you… that that’s…” Shauna trailed off. Sick rose in her throat, sharp and acidic.

Jackie shrugged. “I don’t know what I believe. I don’t fucking think about it. I didn’t even know what I believed *then*, I just… didn’t think it could hurt.”

Of course it could’ve hurt. It *must’ve* hurt, and it could’ve killed. It could have taken Jackie’s fucking life and she’d done it anyway, on the off chance that some blood magic spirit would save Shauna’s. Shauna pulled Jackie against her, slipping her arms around her waist and drawing her as close as they’d been that first night, standing in Shauna’s kitchen. Jackie wrapped her arms around Shauna’s neck and cradled the back of her head with one hand, guiding Shauna’s face to her neck.

“This is… I mean, this is impossible, right?” Nat’s voice hadn’t strengthened from its whisper. She looked shell-shocked, her jaw hinged open.

Shauna pulled back to look at Jackie, her mouth opening and closing rapidly without sound, because what the fuck could she even say? Jackie took Shauna’s hips, spinning her around to face the others. She pressed her chest against Shauna’s back and slipped both arms around her waist, perching her chin on her shoulder.

“It’s okay,” she mumbled in Shauna’s ear, low enough that the others wouldn’t hear. “We need to pay attention.”

Jackie was right. Shauna knew that she was, but her attention wasn’t really redirectable, at the moment. She couldn’t do much more than nod once, place her arms on top of Jackie’s, and focus on slowing her breathing.

“You know, I’ve been wondering,” Misty said, breaking the fraught silence, ‘about Jackie.’ Shauna dug her fingers into Jackie’s arms at the mention of her name. She wanted it out of Misty’s mouth. She wanted the attention off of them. Jackie drew her thumbs in soothing circles against Shauna’s stomach. “Because what Lottie said is right—hypothermia can look more damning than it is, but… I’m fairly certain that Jackie was on death’s doorstep.”

Shauna dug her nails into Jackie’s skin. Jackie pressed a quick kiss to her neck. They were in this together. Whatever the fuck this was, it was going to be okay, because Shauna had Jackie and they were in it together. *She’s here. It’s okay. She’s here.*

“So, I thought back—you know, retracing my steps mentally—to try and see where I got it wrong and… well, Shauna, you just *refused* to calm down.” Misty sounded genuinely annoyed, as if she couldn’t understand why Shauna would have chosen to behave in such an undignified way. ‘You went a bit… feral. It seemed like you might try to die with her.’ Jackie squeezed Shauna tighter. It pressed even more air out of her. “Which, looking back with context, is actually kind of romantic. But, anyway, I…”

“You hit her over the head with a rock,” Tai said sharply.

“Yes.” Misty shot Tai a look for the interruption. “And head wounds, they… tend to bleed. So, technically, you spilt blood for Jackie, too.”

Shauna broke out of Jackie’s grasp and ran to the kitchen. She snagged the trash can, jerking it towards herself just in time to catch the vomit that spewed out of her. She wretched. Her head spun. Pain pounded behind her eyes. Jackie followed. She pulled Shauna’s hair back

and held it loosely, some twisted reenactment of their youth—Malibu and milk and Lottie's fancy bathroom and Shauna crying because she'd made herself sick over Jackie and Jeff and the sick was bubbling up and Jackie was her ruin and her salvation and her fucking everything.

"Call me crazy all you want." Van's voice cut through the fog of Shauna's thoughts. "I think it's real. And, because of that, I very much think we should not be fucking with it for personal gain."

"I didn't know I was doing it," Tai was quick to defend herself. 'I don't think we have to… decide to do it. Shauna— "Shauna peered at Taissa over the side of the trash can and shook her head. The motion made the pain behind her eyes seer angrily." No listen,' Tai pushed forward, "a rabbit keeps showing up in your garden. And what do you do? You kill it and feed it to your family. Then Jackie fucking Taylor has a sudden change of heart and shows up in your kitchen after twenty-five years?"

"I really don't get this rabbit thing," Jackie muttered under her breath. "I don't even like rabbits."

Shauna made a noise that was almost a laugh.

"It doesn't matter. That's exactly what I'm trying to say," Tai said. "Shauna, tell me you weren't thinking of her when you did it. You can't, right? Because you were. You were thinking of Jackie."

"Misty sent me a creepy, threatening postcard!" Jackie yelled. Shauna winced at the noise. 'Sorry,' Jackie said, much quieter, rubbing her lower back gently. "And Nat was in danger. Shauna didn't *summon* me, for fuck's sake."

"It isn't just about you coming back, though. It's more than that." Tai stepped closer to them cautiously. "You two snapped back together, like no time at all had passed, right?"

Shauna stood upright, feeling satisfied that there was nothing left in her stomach to purge, and turned her back to Tai, rinsing her mouth under the tap.

"I guess, sort of," Jackie said. She leaned against the counter, her arms crossed against her chest. There was reservation in her tone, an unwillingness to confirm anything until she knew exactly what Taissa was getting at.

Shauna tore a paper towel off of the roll and blotted at her face, mopping up the water she'd let run down her chin, along with the sweat clinging to her. Tai stood on the opposite side of the island, her hands perched on the back of a bar stool. "Do you feel like forty-three year old Jackie and Shauna, who have lives and responsibilities and fucking… critical thinking skills, or do you feel like eighteen year old, impulsive, codependent Jackie and Shauna? Who's calling the shots right now?"

Jackie scoffed, and Shauna stole the hair tie off of her wrist, fixing her own hair into a ponytail to keep it away from her face. She was growing warmer by the second.

"To be fair, Tai," Misty said, hopping up on the stool next to her, "that's a real, well-documented, psychological phenomenon. It's a very normal regression, to fall back into the patterns you established at the time you were close to a person. *Especially* if trauma is involved."

“But is it *just* behavior patterns?” Tai looked between Jackie and Shauna quickly. Desperate. Exhausted. Begging not to be alone in this. “Or do you *literally* feel like you’re picking up where you left off?” Tai patted the table with an open hand for emphasis.

Shauna had felt that way when they’d fought in their motel room, an uncanny sense that no time had passed. She’d worried her sleeves between her fingers just like she’d done as a teen. She’d felt indescribably young. But that was normal, right? That was the exact biological or psychological shit that Misty had been describing, wasn’t it?

“What’s your point?” Jackie asked. “What exactly are you saying? You think Shauna did some accidental magic spell that did what, exactly? Forced us into some… some alternate reality where we became teenage us again?”

“I mean, not exactly that, but… sort of, I guess?” Tai pulled the chair out, sitting with a sigh. “I don’t know how this shit works. All I’m saying is that you have to admit it’s weird.”

Misty placed a hand over Taissa’s. Tai yanked out of reach.

Of course Shauna had thought it was weird. She’d known why she’d agreed to it all immediately—desperate women don’t ask questions when they’re handed everything they’ve ever wanted. But why the fuck had Jackie jumped in? Gone from nothing to everything? Was it like Nat had said, that seeing Shauna had been enough to resurface old feelings? Or was there some strange truth to what Tai was saying? Shauna shook her head, trying to clear it. No, this was crazy. It wasn’t real. This shit couldn’t be real.

“Shauna and I are just… we’re just fucked up people,” Jackie said, sounding genuinely empathetic. “Like, that’s the whole thing. I promise you.”

A sharp crack of shattering glass echoed through the house. Everyone jumped to the source. The back door was paneled, rectangular panes encased in white wood, and one of them had been knocked out. A tall figure in a gray jumpsuit, sporting a matching ski mask that obscured their face, stood behind the door, crowbar in hand. Shauna grabbed Jackie’s arm automatically and pulled back firmly, putting herself between Jackie and the aspiring intruder.

“Motherfucker,” Nat said.

They all backed up in unison, except Van, who moved closer to the living room window to peer through the curtains.

“Incoming!” she yelled. “Fucking creeps in matching outfits. Looks like three total!”

“Guns?” Tai asked.

“Us or them?” Misty yelled, running into the kitchen.

“Either!” Tai said.

“None on them.” Van joined the rest of them in the center of the room. “At least not that I can see.”

“My rifle is in the fucking trunk,” Nat groaned. “It’s the same fuckers that took me, I bet you anything!”

Bang, bang, bang —the front door was being rammed repeatedly.

“Shit,” Shauna hissed. She dropped Jackie’s arm and turned, in search of—

“Here.” Misty handed Shauna the largest knife from the block. “I was already getting it for you.”

Tai split her attention between the front and back doors, her head swiveling on her neck, her weight perched in the balls of her feet like she was preparing for a sprint. “What do we have, people?”

“I’ve got another knife!” Misty called, passing it to Tai. “Shoot, the rest are all serrated. Who needs this many serrated knives?” She seemed to settle on one of the larger ones, gripping it loosely in her hand.

“Van,” Jackie shouted, tossing her a hammer she’d dug out of a junk drawer. Van caught it and tested the weight in her hands.

“God fucking damn it,” Lottie muttered under her breath. She lifted the fire extinguisher out of its wall-mount, holding it tight with both hands.

Jackie grabbed the heavy cast iron pan that Shauna had cooked their eggs in earlier that morning from the stovetop, gripping it like a baseball bat.

The small plane of glass closest to the doorknob shattered. A hand reached though, fussing with the lock.

“What’s the fucking plan, here?” Nat snatched another pan from the cabinet beside the oven.

There was a crunch and a yelp—Van had smashed the fucker’s hand with the hammer, but it was too late. They’d already unlocked the door. She backed up, bounding on her heels, ready for a fight.

“The plan is we all come out alive,” Shauna said forcefully, trying to stay calm. Trying not to think about the twinge of excitement that mingled with her fear. Trying not to imagine Jackie’s pretty face motionless.

The front door slammed open at almost the exact same time as the back.

“I’m on board with that,” Nat said.

“Let’s do this.” Tai was breathing heavily, knife at the ready—eerily calm, just as the rest of them were.

Shauna allowed herself one glance at Jackie. Jackie met her eyes, scared but determined, and nodded at her. Shauna wanted all of them to come out alive, even fucking Misty, but she was absolutely going to make sure that she and Jackie did.

Tai and Misty both started toward the front door.

“No!” Nat snapped. “Stay in here. Make them come to us. Don’t isolate yourself. We’re stronger as a…”

“Pack,” Van finished, her voice laced with anger.

There were six of them, in total. Matching sigils hung around their necks, matching knives gripped in their hands—small, the length of Shauna's palm, but sharp.

Time moved quickly. Shauna couldn't keep track of everyone in the chaos, but she did catch glimpses. Lottie bringing the fire extinguisher down hard on one of their heads. Nat screaming at one of them to say something (they didn't), while she dodged a swing of their knife. Van knocking one of them in the knee with the hammer. Tai bending over to slash their throat the second they hit the ground. Jackie standing on the kitchen island, knocking one of them upside the head with the pan, kicking another square in the face when their hand wrapped around her ankle.

Shauna killed two of them. A man and a woman, she thought. One had wrapped her arms around Tai's waist, trying to drag her away. Shauna had taken her out with a stab to the back, likely puncturing a lung based on the way she'd collapsed. The other had been advancing on Shauna. She'd slashed his wrist, forcing him to drop the knife, then grabbed him by his ridiculous sigil necklace and pulled him closer. She'd finished him with a knife to the gut, same as Adam.

They were extremely tenacious, but not at all efficient. Shauna didn't see any visible injuries on her former teammates. It seemed like the creeps were aiming only to injure them or to drag them away. Almost, Shauna thought with a shudder, as though they were being careful not to kill them. And that was a far more terrifying prospect to women who knew all too well what could happen to you if you got taken alive.

"Where the fuck is Misty?" Nat hollered, landing a blow to one of their shoulders.

"Here!" came Misty's voice, incredibly calm. She was wading through the room, dodging fists and knives as she went, staying low to the ground with Nat's rifle in tow. There were three of their attackers—Shauna wondered if she could even call them that, considering the way that they were behaving—left. Each of them was injured to some degree, each of them still moving in spite.

"Misty, you beautiful, crazy bitch!" Nat yelled. Misty tossed her the rifle from a short distance and she snagged it out of the air, immediately clicking off the safety. The sweatsuits seemed either not to notice or not to care about the introduction of a gun to the equation. They made no effort to run or communicate—it was like nothing changed for them. 'I am so done,' Nat screamed maniacally, cocking the rifle, "with this shit show, house of horrors, bullshit!"

"Yellowjackets!" Jackie shouted. "Hit the deck!"

They did. They threw themselves to the ground. All of them except Nat, who raised the gun and fired exactly three shots.

"So," Jackie wiped her palm against her thigh, leaving garish red marks on the light blue of her pants, "if you think killing a dog swayed an entire election and killing a bunny rabbit kicked us into some kind of alternate timeline, what the fuck do you think this did?"

Jackie was standing in the kitchen. She held the cast iron pan loosely at her side, blood dripping off of it and onto the white tile below. Her expression was completely unreadable. Blood streaked across her face, too, in a line so perfectly diagonal it looked drawn on, from

her temple to the opposite side of her jaw. There was a gap across her lips, surrounded by a smear where she'd wiped it away.

Tai was bent forward, her hands on her knees, as if she'd just run that sprint Shauna had felt she was prepping for earlier. Shauna couldn't see her face. There was a knife by her feet, a splatter of blood across her otherwise perfectly white tennis shoes. Van was stretching, her hands perched in the small of her back, blood smeared across her elbow. She looked pissed more than anything else, her jaw set. Lottie was the only one sitting—cross-legged on the floor with her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands. Her hair was matted with blood. The fire extinguisher was bloodied, too, balanced on her lap. Misty was leaning over one of the bodies, checking for a pulse. She looked fairly unperturbed, her purple sweater completely saturated with dark red along one side. Nat was standing by the back door, rifle in hand, blood on her neck and chest. She was on edge, seemingly unconvinced that the attack was over.

Shauna's arms bore swaths of red that stood out against her pale skin. Red all the way to the handle of the knife still in her hand, red under her fingernails. She dropped the knife suddenly, and the noise startled the other women into motion. Van headed to the front door, dragging a barstool behind her to barricade it. Nat did the same at the back.

"It doesn't matter whether it's something… bigger or not," Tai said slowly, waving to the carnage around them. "We are totally, completely fucked."

"What the hell do we do now?" Nat asked.

"That was so fucking… weird," Van said.

Lottie stood suddenly. Tears shone on her cheeks and her eyes were rimmed red, but she wasn't actively crying. She walked to the kitchen and grabbed a dish rag, running it under the tap and scrubbing at her hands.

"Lottie?" Jackie asked gently.

Lottie didn't answer. She passed the same rag over her hair roughly and tossed it aside, heading back to the living room and scooping Van's keys up off of the end table.

"Lottie?" It was Van's turn to try.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?" Tai demanded.

"Where am I going?" Lottie's voice was the most assertive it'd been since they'd gotten to the house, both opposite of and familiar as the distant lilt she'd been sporting. It sent a chill through Shauna's spine. "I'm checking myself into the goddamn looney bin, because I am *not* doing this again with you fucking bitches!"

"I don't think it's safe for any of us to go anywhere alone," Misty said.

"Van, where the hell are your cigarettes?" Lottie rummaged through Van's backpack without strategy. Van stepped forward carefully, handing her the pack and a lighter. She tried to take the keys out of Lottie's grasp in turn, but Lottie sidestepped and slipped them into her pocket. "I am going to a nice quiet room with white walls, where I can get absolutely fucking zonked out of my mind on Haldol!"

Lottie started for the door. Tai, Van, and Shauna instantly stepped closer to her and she froze, staring them all down.

"You *started* this!" Tai yelled.

"Yeah, well, who the fuck says I have to finish it? It is not my fault you decided to listen to a psychotic teenager. Own your mistakes, live with your shit, whatever kumbaya, namaste bullshit you need to hear right now!" Lottie waved her arms aimlessly. "I'm out."

She tried to step forward again, but Shauna grabbed her by the collar and yanked her back into the center of the room.

"Nobody is leaving," she said. 'Not until we deal with this.' Lottie skirted left. Shauna blocked her. "I said *no*, Lottie."

Van scoffed. "What're you going to do to stop her, huh, Shauna? Kill her?"

"I just might," Shauna spat. Lottie tried to duck around her, but Shauna caught her arm and held tight, ignoring her dramatic squirming. She kept her eyes on Van's. 'Go ahead, try me.' Shauna pushed Lottie back and down. She hit the floor just shy of one of the corpses, yelping when her hand landed on its stomach. "We can find out together."

"Oh, ho! There she is!" Van grinned with complete malice as she helped Lottie back to her feet. "The mousy little passive act never holds up under pressure, does it? Shauna's back in the game, everybody!"

"You're really fucking pushing it, Vanessa," Shauna said.

"Oh, yeah? What're you going to do about it?" Van moved closer, her hands balled into fists at her sides. 'Double the body count all by yourself?' There was a small clatter. Tai had kicked the knife at Shauna's feet away from her, hard enough that it slid into the kitchen. Jackie picked it up, tossing it into the sink quickly. Shauna rolled her eyes and turned away from Van. She needed to get to the bathroom, needed this blood off of her and fast. Whatever game Van was playing could wait. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen," Van muttered sarcastically.

There was no thought, anymore. No care or consideration for the fact that Jackie and Taissa were watching her in horror, that they'd played keep-away with a knife, afraid that she might stab Van. There was only anger—white hot, uncontrollable, damning. Shauna spun on her heel and punched Van hard. Van's nose crunched audibly under her hand. Her knuckles throbbed. Van stumbled backwards on impact, caught off guard, but Lottie caught her by the elbows before she fell.

Van laughed, blood rolling down her face, and shook her head. "This is what you want, Jack? Really?"

Jackie set her eyes on the far wall, looking past both of them stubbornly. Tai grabbed Shauna's shoulder to hold her back, but Shauna had no fucking intention of engaging with Van further. She shook Taissa off and started walking to the bathroom, dizzy enough that she had to brush her fingertips along the walls for stability. She automatically went through her and Jackie's bedroom to the ensuite, slamming the door behind her and cranking the shower on as cold as it would go. Her skin was on fire. She stuck her arms in and scrubbed at the red until it was watercolor, diluted by the stream, painting the bottom of the tub pink. Her

knuckles burned angrily. She couldn't think. She could barely breathe, close to hyperventilation, but passing out sounded like a welcome break. It was too much. It was—

The door creaked open.

"What?" Shauna snapped.

"It's me." Jackie sounded terrified, and Shauna couldn't stomach Jackie being afraid of her.

"Can you just give me a fucking minute?" Shauna yelled desperately, digging under her nails to force the last of the blood down the drain.

"No," Jackie said stubbornly. 'I really can't.' Shauna sighed, shaking her hands to rid them of as much excess water as she could. "Because I need you to get your shit together." Jackie turned the water off and handed Shauna a towel. "You're scaring me." Jackie's voice was soft, but her expression was one of fixed determination. "You're, like… somewhere else right now. I can tell. So… come back to yourself."

"Like Tai's bullshit other reality thing?" Shauna finished blotting at her arms and tossd the towel onto the counter. "Really, Jackie?"

"No!" Jackie said. "Like *mentally*, Shauna. Like you aren't in an okay place, mentally."

"You don't even fucking know me! Maybe this is just who I am!" Shauna shook her head until it ached. 'You didn't even know me before! I treated you like shit and you were fucking clueless.' Shauna slammed her hand into the cabinet, watching as it rebounded. Jackie chewed the inside of her cheek, a dangerous flash of anger crossing her eyes. "So don't talk to me like I'm some good fucking person who just needs to relax. This is it, okay? This is me!"

"You *love* me," Jackie said, with a venom in her tone that didn't match her words.

"Jackie, wha—"

"You love me!" Jackie screamed. 'You aren't lying about that, so the rest of that shit doesn't fucking matter! I don't care if we *have* gone through some magical, age regression bullshit or if we're just… stupidly attached to each other, okay?' Jackie grabbed Shauna's shoulders roughly. "I—" she shook Shauna, "don't—" another shake, "care!" Shauna shrugged her off. "You love me." She jabbed a finger into the center of Shauna's breastbone. "And you are not going to do this to me! I don't care who the fuck you think you are." She took Shauna's cheeks in her hands, squeezing hard enough to leave bruises on her sensitive skin. Shauna let her. "You are *not* going to do this to me right now, do you hear me?" Jackie's voice cracked. The pain behind Shauna's eyes flared and she winced. "I need you," Jackie sobbed. "So figure your shit out, Shauna. You say you've felt guilty about abandoning me your whole fucking life? That it made you crazy? So don't," she shoved Shauna's chest, "fucking do it again."

Jackie's body heaved with effort. Her pretty cheeks were splotchy and pink. The blood on her face ran with snot and tears. Looking at her like this made something in Shauna snap. Her whole body shook, her knees giving out, sending her sideways into the counter.

"Whoa!" Jackie caught her around the waist. 'Hey. Shauna, put your arms around me, c'mon.' Shauna gripped Jackie's shoulders, and Jackie slid them to the ground. Shauna

pitched forward, Jackie catching her weight. She felt hot and sick, sweat clinging to her forehead and pooling on her chest. Jackie cradled her close. “If you’re faking this to get out of an argument,” Jackie said softly, her lips against Shauna’s temple, “I’m going to be so pissed.”

Shauna almost laughed—a weak exhale through her nose—and shook her head slightly against Jackie’s neck. “Dizzy,” she whispered. Her throat felt dry.

Jackie smoothed her hair back. “Do I need to get Misty?”

“No, just… give me a minute. Don’t leave me.” Shauna’s voice was tiny. Pathetic. “I’m sorry.”

“I love you,” Jackie said. *I love you.* Not *it’s okay* or *I forgive you.* And Shauna understood why. She’d lost it out there.

“I love you so much,” she answered, sitting up to look at Jackie.

“I know.” Jackie swept tears off of Shauna’s cheeks with gentle fingers. “You feel any better?”

“A little,” Shauna nodded, “yeah.”

“Good. Turn around.” Jackie pointed to the wall.

Shauna gave her a puzzled look, but she just raised her eyebrows expectantly. Shauna turned. Jackie repositioned herself behind her, her legs out to the sides so that Shauna was between them, and pulled the hair tie out of her hair. Her ponytail had come halfway undone during the fight, her hair sticking out at odd angles. She wondered vaguely if there was blood in it like Lottie’s.

Jackie combed through it with her fingers, scratching at Shauna’s scalp as she went. Shauna sobbed quietly at Jackie’s tenderness. She was sweet and loving and *Shauna’s*, if Shauna let herself believe in the conversations they’d had before everything had gone to hell. Jackie tugged one section of her hair twice, telling her to tip her head back, just as she had when they were kids. Shauna obliged, her eyes shut tight. Jackie French braided her hair quickly, tying it off at the end.

“There. Much better,” Jackie said. She helped Shauna to her feet and turned for the door.

“Wait—” Shauna caught her arm, and she pivoted immediately. ‘Come here,’ Shauna said. She wet a clean washcloth with warm water, dabbing gently at the blood streaked across Jackie’s face until all of it was gone. “Okay, better.”

Jackie didn’t move. She took Shauna’s face in her hands, gently this time, and kissed her. “If you feel yourself start to get… like that, you come to *me.* You look at *me,”* Jackie said. “Yeah?”

“Jax,” Shauna whimpered. She didn’t want to have this conversation. She didn’t want to be treated like this ticking fucking time bomb. Which meant, she knew, that she needed to stop acting like one. *Fuck.*

Jackie took Shauna’s hands in her own, squeezing. “If you get like that with one of them again, I’m putting myself between you,” she said evenly.

"No," Shauna said, "you are not."

"I am." Jackie placed Shauna's hands on her shoulders and wrapped her arms around her waist. "I really am."

"I'm not the only fucking unstable one in the bunch, Jackie, you are not—"

"I know that," Jackie cut her off, "so you'd better not start anything, okay? You can defend yourself. But I'm not going to have you starting shit and… and standing out, because I need you here. With me."

Shauna cradled the back of Jackie's head, pulling her in. She could feel Jackie's breath against her neck, could smell her hair, could hear her swallowing back tears. Shauna drank Jackie down, each of her senses clouded beautifully by her. "Okay, Jax. Okay."

"Hey, Jackie," Misty said with a too-wide smile, as they reentered the living room.

Everyone was still there. *Good.*

"Yeah?" Jackie asked.

"We've been trying to figure out how to clean up our mess," Misty said. "This one is a little out of my wheelhouse, if I'm being perfectly honest. But… I thought *you* might have some ideas. Lottie and I passed a gas station a few miles down the road. No cameras." Misty's smile morphed to a grin—a fucking shit eating grin.

What in the damn hell?

Jackie's face was unreadable, yet again. She quirked a brow and forced a smile. "Fresh out of ideas, Misty. Sounds like you might have one, though?"

"Okay," Nat groaned. She flopped down onto the couch, her rifle still in her hand. "What the fuck are you two talking about right now?"

"Yeah, enough with the speaking in codes," Tai said.

Jackie crossed her arms and tilted her head expectantly. *This* look was one that Shauna recognized. It was the look that Jackie had given other teams when they'd squared off, the one that Coach had told her to *knock off of her face* during huddles. This was a challenge, but Shauna had no earthly clue what it was about.

"I told you that I tracked you down," Misty said cheerily. 'I assumed you knew what that entailed. But I can spell it out for you, if you want.' Jackie stepped closer to her. Misty turned her gaze to the group. "Okay, well, I'm sure we would've gotten to this during our sharing time, if we hadn't been interrupted," she looked down at the corpses, as if to admonish them for their poor manners, "and I was *hoping* Jackie would share, but I guess I can."

"Misty," Shauna said, moving closer, "if it isn't your thing, maybe you shouldn't—"

"I want to hear it," Nat said. "Now isn't the time for games, though, Misty. We have shit to deal with. So spit it the fuck out."

“Okay, long story short, then,” Misty said. “There’s this suspected serial killer—three deaths, that’s when it becomes serial, regardless of *why* they’re doing it. I wonder how many of us technically fit that category, actually.”

“*Misty!”*

“*Come on!”*

“Fine! Fine. Anyway, they popped up in my citizen detective group, and I found them just *fascinating.* It took a long time to link the crimes. Super spread out, geographically and time wise, but the MO was *exactly* the same in each one.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Van snapped, “bring it around to the point. I don’t need some bullshit back story. Can we fast forward to the part that has anything to do with Jackie?”

“Oh, but this does!” Misty said. Jackie hadn’t moved, her face hadn’t changed. She was giving nothing. ‘See, this person has to be a woman. Moral killings, as painless as possible. One gunshot to the back of the head. Women don’t often like to look at people when they kill them— *most* women that is.’ Misty shot the room a knowing look that made Shauna squirm. “I say *moral* killings, because all of the victims were men who were known blackmailers, bounty hunters, the like. Sketchy men who track down people who don’t want to be found for a living. The interesting part though, the thing that cinches it, is that all the buildings where the bodies were found—empty buildings, apparently that’s a thing for meeting with blackmailers,” she shrugged, chuckling a little, “were burnt down so efficiently there was no evidence. Other than the victim’s bones, of course. Instead of just… wiping off prints or burying the body, this woman left the men in the room and burned the whole thing to the ground.”

Misty planted her hands on her hips and faced Jackie square on.

“Once the cases were connected, law enforcement focused on known fugitives. That’s self explanatory, right? Look for people who have a good reason not to be found. Somebody must’ve been picking off the people that were sent after them. It made sense. But nothing ever came up. The thing is,” Misty grinned at Jackie, ‘Jackie Taylor isn’t a known fugitive, because she doesn’t exist. Kind of poetic, don’t you think?’ Misty voice fell suddenly serious. “Ice and fire?”

Shauna opened her mouth to tell Misty that she was out of her fucking mind, that she needed to shut her mouth, to log off of her little sick freak chatrooms for good, but Jackie was quicker.

“Are you done, Misty?” Her tone was honey-sweet. Misty pushed her glasses up and shrugged, clearly thrown by Jackie’s response. She looked around the room for support, but everyone was busy watching Jackie. “Hmm,” Jackie hummed, smoothing her shirt carefully with both hands. She took her time walking towards Misty, closing the gap between them before copying Misty’s little shrug.

She kept a smile on her face up until the very second her hand made contact with Misty’s cheek.

A lot of things happened, all at once. A loud crack echoed through the room. Jackie’s expression shifted to one of sheer, unbridled disgust. Lottie jumped and covered her mouth.

Nat swore almost inaudibly. And Shauna, stunned as she was, stepped forward without thinking, positioning herself closer to Jackie.

The slap had been hard. Backhanded. Jackie's rings had left little imprints on Misty's reddening cheek. Her glasses had slipped to the side, and were now hanging on by one ear. She repositioned them brisky. The shock in the room wasn't about the smack to the face. It was about the fact that Jackie seemed to be confirming Misty's wild claims.

"Oh, fuck, Jackie," Van breathed out, shifting a little.

Tai put her arm out in front of Van at her flinch, as if to stop her from getting in the middle of this. (Shauna didn't particularly want to get in the middle of this, but she would if she had to.) Misty swallowed, equal parts stunned and excited. She was calculating something, sizing Jackie up somehow.

"I was never," Jackie said calmly, 'anything but kind to you, Misty. Never. And that,' she pointed a finger, inches from Misty's nose, "is the second time you've put a target on my back." Jackie fixed the smile back onto her face. She was beautiful and terrifying and, in that moment, just as unhinged as Misty fucking Quigley. "I know that you think you're the scariest bitch around." Jackie held the air of a woman explaining something to a disappointed child. "And maybe you think I'm still just a naive little girl. But—"

Misty's hand twitched up. They wouldn't find out, however, just what she'd planned on doing, because Jackie closed her fingers around Misty's wrist, pushing it firmly back to her side. She kept talking as if nothing had happened. "—I think you're smarter than that. I mean, none of us made it this far without a little collateral damage, right?" Sweet tone, scary smile. Misty made a sound somewhere between a scoff and a laugh and moved to push Jackie off of her, but—once again—Jackie shot a hand out and wrapped it around Misty's wrist, suspending it in the air. "I know *exactly* who you are, Misty. And you," Jackie Misty's arms down to her sides, pinning both of her wrists against her thighs, "*you* think you have me figured out."

Jackie released Misty suddenly, causing her to stumble back. Shauna took another small step closer to Jackie's side—close enough that she could reach out and yank Jackie behind herself in a second if she had to, though Jackie seemed to be doing surprisingly well on her own. "But you have no idea who I am." Jackie's voice chilled.

"So show me," Misty said, breathless. "That's my entire point, Jackie. Show us. Get us through this mess. I'm not attacking you, I'm asking you for help." She looked fucking thrilled—buzzing with anticipation, brushing her fingers over her cheek, as she maintained eye contact with Jackie.

"Ho-ly shit, dude," Nat said. "That's a lot."

"Listen, Jackie, I think we got off on the wrong foot," Misty said. "You know, these reunions are so tense. It's just sort of the way it goes. I mean, even Nat and I had a little bit of a rough go of it in the beginning, but now we're two peas in a pod! Right, Nat?"

"Yeah." Nat sounded entirely unamused. "Two peas. Fucking A."

"But I meant what I said," Misty insisted. "We need you. Now more than ever."

Jackie took a deep breath and perched herself on the edge of the chair she'd been using for all their conversations— *sharing time*, as Misty had referred to it. Shauna returned to her own seat, leaning over the side closest to Jackie, just as Jackie had done for Shauna when she'd told the truth about Adam and Jeff.

"Okay," Jackie said, "can everybody just… sit down for a minute?"

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2004

"Fuck."

Shauna's hand jerked and slipped. She laid flat, letting her weight sink into the mattress, and repositioned the obnoxiously pink vibrator quickly, desperate to finish. She hit the right spot again, and her hips shot open wider. She was still fully dressed, her long floral skirt hiked up to give her access. In her left hand, she clutched a photo.

It was from Mari's infamous Halloween party, their senior year. Jackie wore her tried and true sexy cat outfit—a simple black leotard with a particularly low neckline, tights, a cat ear headband, and whiskers drawn carefully with black eyeliner across her flushed cheeks. Shauna wore a white dress; she'd said that she was a ghost and called it a day. She sat on a rickety folding chair out by the bonfire, Jackie perched in her lap. Jackie's back was pressed completely to Shauna's chest, and she reached back with one arm to cradle Shauna's head. With a beer in her free hand, her eyes glassy, and a small smirk on her face, she looked directly into the camera. Shauna clutched her tight, one had on her thigh, much higher than she had any business placing it in public, the other snaked around her middle, securing her in place. Shauna also looked faded, also wore a small smile, but she tilted her head toward Jackie—eyes on her, rather than the camera.

Shauna panted. The pressure was building again. She chewed her lip, staring at the photo. Her thighs quivered around her hand and she pressed down hard, snapping her eyes shut and letting out a single, controlled moan as the knot loosened. Even with her eyes closed, it was Jackie that Shauna saw. Jackie, sitting on the edge of the bathtub in Mari's guest bathroom, one strap of her leotard falling off of her shoulder. Jackie's collarbone, painted a deep, berry red from Shauna's lipstick. Jackie's thigh, centered between both of Shauna's as she straddled her, holding the shower wall for balance. Jackie's manicured fingers, digging into Shauna's hips. Jackie's lips, curving around sweet words, encouraging Shauna to let herself go.

Shauna switched the vibrator off. She left her eyes shut, willing her breathing to slow. Her heart ached in her chest and maybe, if she was lucky, she could slip into sleep to avoid feeling everything for an hour or two.

"Shauna?" Jeff's careful voice came from the doorway.

Shauna shot up, pulling her skirt down, shoving the photo and vibrator behind herself as she scrambled backwards.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

She was usually so careful not to let him see her like this. He'd seen her at her worst, that was an unfortunate certainty. He'd seen her breakdown over Jackie plenty of fucking times, screaming and sobbing, or worse, going silent and immobile for hours, sometimes days. But this… she didn't want him to know about this. Sick, twisted, depraved. Shauna knew it was.

She didn't want to be this way. She just couldn't fucking help herself. It was a compulsion. A need.

She sat up against the pillows, hugging her knees to her chest. Her eyes were wide and her breaths came too quick. She counted them, trying to stave off hyperventilation. That was what the court-ordered therapist had told her to do, after she'd gotten into that bar fight with the idiot who'd recognized her and started spouting off her Yellowjackets theories. *One in, two out. Three in four out. Five in—* It was still bullshit. Shauna abandoned the attempt.

"When… when did you get home?" she asked quietly.

Jeff hovered in place near the doorway, staring at her with his jaw slack. "Just a bit ago. Got off early."

"Oh, um…" Her voice was so pitiful it pissed her off. Tears burned her eyes. Jeff had definitely seen. He was going to leave her. This was too much. He was going to leave her and she was going to have to deal with everything alone.

"Shauna…" Jeff sat next to her, leaving six inches of space between them. Shauna buried her face in her knees. "What were you doing?"

"I… I was… y'know, just—fuck," Shauna gasped, frustrated. "I didn't think you'd be home. I was just… I was…" A furious blush warmed her cheeks.

"Honey, I saw the, um… the picture." The words stuck in Jeff's throat, but he managed to force them out.

Shauna wanted to pry open his mouth and shove them back down, make him choke on them, because how dare he make her do this? What kind of fucking conversation was to be had? Why was he drawing this out? The tears fell faster and blurred her vision until she was underwater. Playing in the pool with Jackie, their hair plastered to their cheeks. Letting the shower run straight over her eyes in the locker room, because to look at Jackie there was to look directly into the sun. Dunking her head beneath the lake's surface to shut out Lottie's murmuring—Laura Lee's ashes, how they'd mixed with the silt, how they'd formed sacred earth.

"Hey, hey. Shauna." Jeff slipped his arm around her shoulders and tried to pull her in. She resisted, suffocated by his touch, by his presence, by the four fucking walls of their fucking house. "It's… it's okay. I just think we should probably, uh, talk about it."

He stopped trying to force her close, but he didn't retreat. Shauna sobbed harder, her shoulders shaking with force. She imagined sinking through the floor. Landing in nothing. Dying sweet and young (to the outside observer, because to know her meant to know that she had never been sweet, and she would always be young). Jeff ran his thumb back and forth across her shoulder. He swallowed, shoring himself up to push her. Usually when Shauna cried like this, Jeff let her erratic behavior slide. He was too afraid of her poke or prod or pry. Shauna leaned into the tears, angling to evoke that weary, uneasy sympathy.

"Babe." Jeff squeezed her shoulder gently. It made her skin crawl. 'I just want you to help me understand, because that doesn't seem… well, it doesn't seem healthy.' Shauna shook her head violently, gasping for air. "Is this—is it new?"

"No," Shauna sobbed. "No, it isn't *new.* I—I—I've always—"

Nothing about her meltdown was embellished any longer. None of it was for show. Shauna truly couldn't calm herself. Jeff pulled her close again, and this time she let him, tipping her weight sideways so that she was half in his lap, her legs still clutched to her chest and the side of her face pressed against his shirt. It felt a little bit good to be held, Jeff's arms circling her body completely, and Shauna fucking hated herself for that.

"Did it… I mean, did you… Shauna, why to a picture of her?" Jeff asked. "Did this start right after she…"

Died, Jeff. He meant to say *right after she died.* He would never say it. He refused to call it what it was, like he thought she couldn't handle hearing the words, even though she'd witnessed the actual event, and that infuriated Shauna. (She couldn't handle it, of course. She couldn't handle any of it, and there'd been times when she'd stopped talking for hours at the mention of her name, weeks when her birthday rolled around, months when she'd first—)

No. She couldn't do this right now. Shauna shook her head to banish the thoughts, her temple digging and twisting against Jeff's sternum. He took the motion as a response to his question.

"So… it took a while then? I just… why this, babe? This seems a little—is it a self harm thing?"

Shauna laughed—more of a hybrid laugh and sob, but it was noticeable enough that Jeff shifted uncomfortably. She sat up and faced him. He had that confused look on his face, the one that told her he wasn't even attempting to decipher the situation anymore. No going back now.

"No, Jeff. It isn't—well, I guess it could still be a self harm thing, but that—okay, that isn't the point." Shauna wiped the tears from her cheeks. "It didn't start right after she *died—"* she emphasized the word, earning a little jolt of satisfaction when Jeff flinched, "because it—it started before."

"Before?" Jeff asked.

She was really going to have to spell it out for him. She'd never even wanted to have this fucking conversation. It wasn't his to know. But she'd been reckless and she was out of options.

"Yes, before. I loved her. She and I… we were… we used to… God damn it, Jeff!" Shauna's voice rose, pitching her close to a scream. "Jackie and I used to… hook up. Like, all the time. I was—" she let out an earth-shattering sob and spat the rest of her words through wet, gasping cries, "in—love—with—her." She buried her face in her hands again, unable to meet his eyes.

Jeff took a slow, deep breath, placing a hand on her knee as he released it. "That… makes sense," he said. Shauna looked up tentatively, half expecting him to say *gotcha, bitch* and change tunes the moment she made eye contact. He didn't. He just brushed her hair off her face with his free hand, genuine sadness and pity reading in his features.

"I—I—really?" Shauna managed between sobs. "You're not m-mad?"

"I'm not mad. I wouldn't be mad about that. That's not… well, honey, it just isn't really my place to be mad about that. I wish you would've told me—" Shauna scrunched her face,

her eyes shut tight. Jeff paused, placing a hand against her cheek until she opened them. "—but Jackie was—she was… well, I understand it, Shauna. You two were so close. I can't say I haven't wondered before if maybe you…" He shrugged.

He wasn't going to leave. Jeff wasn't going to leave her for this. She didn't have to make it on her own. Shauna's sobs slowed to shallower cries. "I… we never talked about it. J-Jackie and I, I mean. I never told her how I felt. We just got drunk and… and made out and… I don't know if she even felt that way about—"

"She did," Jeff said confidently. "She did love you. Like that I mean. She was… in love with you. The way she talked about you and looked at you… it wasn't exactly normal friendship. I know girls are different, but it was… beyond that. And now that I know you two—well, now I'm sure. It was you I wasn't so sure about, back then."

Shauna's entire body shook. She reached hysterics, her sobs broken and wounded. Jeff pulled her close again and she sank into him. He rubbed circles against her lower back with an open hand, his fingers stretched out so that he was touching so much of her at once. Shauna wanted tiny circles. Delicate hands. Nails dancing against the patch of skin between her shoulder blades.

"I miss her so much," she wailed into Jeff's chest.

"I know. I know you do." Jeff kissed the crown of her head. "I'm so sorry."

"I never told her. I should've fucking told her." Shauna knew that she shouldn't be doing this. Sobbing about Jackie to her husband in this context—or to Jackie's ex-boyfriend, for that matter—but, like all things related to Jackie, she just couldn't fucking help herself.

"I think she knew," Jeff mumbled against her hair. "I really do."

After a few long minutes, Shauna's sobs started to ebb. Jeff cleared his throat. "Shauna?"

"Yeah?" Shauna's throat was sandpaper rough, sore and aching.

"I… still think you should try and, um, not do that—"

"Fuck, I *know!"* Shauna snapped. "Don't you think I know that?"

"Okay, okay," Jeff soothed quickly. "It's okay."

"I'm sorry," Shauna forced her tone to be quieter, gentler.

"It's not—I'm not upset about it." Jeff trailed his hand up and down Shauna's spine in silence. "I'm just worried about you."

"Jeff?" Shauna whispered.

"Hmm?"

"I think I'm pregnant."

Jeff didn't say anything. Shauna sobbed harder.

PRESENT

Misty was right. Jackie was technically a serial killer, but she had a lot of feelings about that term being used to describe what she assured them was simply unavoidable self-preservation.

"I just feel like it gives the wrong impression. I'm not, like, out there killing people for fun. Or looking for people to—" Jackie drew her finger across her throat, a mob-boss pantomime suited for a low-budget crime thriller. "All three of those men were hired by God knows who to find me and bring me God knows where. What was I supposed to do? Have a little sit down with them? Take them out to dinner? It wasn't enjoyable, I still hate this shit." She gestured at the bodies scattered around them.

"Jack," Van said. "I truly think the point is sailing straight the fuck over your head right now."

She shook her head into her hands. Her already fair skin was even fairer, paled by worry or surprise or general fucking overwhelm, much like the rest of them. She'd cleaned up her face while Shauna had been in the bathroom. Her nose looked a little off, as if someone had twisted it a centimeter or two to the left, but other than that she seemed fine. As a show of good faith, Shauna had found her an ice pack in the back of the freezer and wrapped it in a cloth, handing it to her from as far away as her outstretched arm would allow. Van had taken it without a word, and currently had it pressed to her cheek.

Everyone had cleaned up some, actually. Misty had stripped off her bloodied cardigan and Tai had rinsed her shoe in the sink, scrubbing at it with the dish brush until it was white again. Nat's hair was damp, and drops of water clung to her neck and chest, replacing the blood that'd been there.

"Yeah, it isn't about whether or not you *enjoy* it, silly!" Misty said, far too enthusiastically, her lips twisted into an authentic smile, not that facsimile shit she tried to force sometimes. Genuine happiness. "That would be impossible to quantify. All that really matters is you've killed three people. I think most of us are technically serial killers at this point, anyway."

"Nat took out three just this evening," Lottie added, her tone bizarre and warped. "So… there you go, Jackie. Not just you." She forced a small smile.

"Actually," Misty chimed in, one finger held up in pause, "that would be a spree killing. Multiple murders at one time in one location, or in very nearby locations, makes you a spree killer. To be considered a serial killer, the murders have to be spread out."

Nat stared at Misty with her jaw hanging open and her head tilted to the side. Shauna rubbed the back of her neck and closed her eyes, willing herself not to let any of the snarky remarks bubbling behind her lips escape. She was already on thin ice and now that Jackie, her previous voice of fucking reason, was going around threatening people, and backhanding them—Shauna was still shocked by that, shocked even more by the way she'd felt it between her legs—they really needed to cool it with the antagonism.

"Great, now that the point has sailed over *everyone's* heads, Jack, can we please start putting your *not really a serial killer* skills to use?" Van asked, her gaze locked uncomfortably firm on Jackie.

Jackie shifted, clenching and unclenching her hands into fists. Jackie wanted to touch Van. Shauna knew that dance, her fingers curling in and releasing just a hair, over and over. Fuck

Van Palmer for getting to be in Jackie's life. Fuck her for not telling Shauna that Jackie was alive. Fuck her for ignoring Shauna's never-fucking-ending downward spiral. *Fuck. Her.*

Van stood, tossing the ice pack down on the coffee table. Shauna blinked, until the angry red sweeping across her field of vision was contained to Van's long hair.

"I'd like to spend less time chatting around the dead bodies and more time cleaning this shit up," Van said, skirting around one of the corpses. "We can't be sure there aren't more fucking… cronies headed our way while we have *semantics with Misty* corner. Just tell us what to do."

"Okay, but my whole *point* is that I'm not some kind of expert. Everyone should know that going in," Jackie said. 'And it wasn't *poetic* or whatever, to be very clear on that one.' She shot Misty a look. "I've literally never thought about it like that. The first time I had to do this I was twenty-three, and I didn't know what the fuck else to do and it worked, so I just sort of….stuck with it when I had to."

"Wait—" Van gaped at her, hurt so easily visible in her eyes. "Twenty-three? We were… you did this then?"

"Oops," Lottie mumbled under her breath, her lips puckered and her brows raised—waiting for drama to unfold. She seemed to have snapped out of her panic just fine, her gaze bouncing between Jackie and Van.

"I—I—it—" Jackie was all regret, flustered and anxious in a way that made her look impossibly young. Deer in headlights, fawn in the middle of a winding road. Screwed. She avoided Van's eyes, her cheeks flaring pink.

"When?" Van demanded.

"Well, I didn't—I mean—I didn't exactly keep a calendar. Like, I don't know the actual date…" Jackie said breathily, a half-hearted attempt at a joke. She met Van's eyes and the already too-quick rise and fall of her chest sped further. A weak attempt at deflection.

Van raised an eyebrow and nodded slowly, her entire upper body rocking with the motion. "Okay. Yeah. I'm sure you truly think that I'm asking you for an exact date. My point is, you could've told me. I could've helped you. But… it doesn't really matter now, does it? Just… let's get this over with."

Jackie chewed her lip and fidgeted with her hands. She glanced at Shauna for less than a second. It sent a wave of nausea through her. Jackie was checking for her reaction, trying to decide how much she could say in front of her. And, not for the first time, Shauna wondered whether Jackie may have understated just how serious her relationship with Van had been. Shauna fought to keep her face impassive, very much trying not to be a factor in this. Tai caught her eye, mouthing *"what the fuck?"* and Shauna shrugged subtly, praying neither Jackie or Van noticed her reaction.

"It wasn't about you. You know that right?" Jackie's expression was neutral. She slipped her hands in her back pockets, suddenly managing to look casual. "I wouldn't have— *didn't* —tell anyone. I was… I needed to handle things alone back then."

This was something that Shauna was used to. Jackie Taylor and her infamously quick mood swings. While she often wore her heart on her sleeve, she could imitate cold calmness

so well when she wanted to. The transition was instant and jarring, wickedly painful. Shauna almost felt sympathy for Van. Almost.

"Let's get a move on, yeah?" Nat said. "I don't want to be here when they send fucking reinforcements, or whatever."

Jackie directed Misty and Van on exactly how much gasoline to get, how to pay, and how long they could spend at the gas station maximum, instructing them to head to another one if there were too many people or if filling up containers took too long. Shauna watched in absolute awe. There was this woman, who she'd known inside and out—all her expressions, all her desires, all her moods, exactly what she was going to say most of the time. Shauna had thought that she'd known all there was to know about Jackie Taylor, because in her mind she'd ceased to exist. There had been no growth, no change, no anything. She'd remained a perfect time capsule: the girl Shauna loved, exactly as she'd always been.

This woman was very much not that girl.

Jackie had the rest of them transfer all of their belongings out of the house and into their cars. They left out a change of clothes for each of them, Nat choosing something for Misty, Lottie choosing something for Van.

"Now what?" Tai asked, rolling up her sleeves.

"Well, I've never done this with multiple bodies before." Jackie pursed her lips, thinking. "But, I think we should, like, drag them all to the same spot, y'know? In the middle of the room, next to this guy." She pointed towards the largest of their attackers, who was face down in the center of the living room.

"Uhhh…" Nat moved closer to him, prodding him with her foot almost absentmindedly. "For logistical reasons, right? Not black magic witch shit? Cause I'm not drawing any goddamn symbols on the floor, or making any shapes with body parts. You can forget about that shit."

"Oh my *God.* Yes, for logistical reasons. Jesus." Jackie scrunched her nose in disgust. 'You've gotta focus the heat on one spot to make sure it actually destroys the body. But we have bod— *ies,* so I need them to be,' she waved her hands in a sweeping motion, from the corners of the room inward, "together."

"Do you want them… how? Like, stacked or just… side by side?" Shauna asked, surveying the other bodies, wondering if they could even lift them high enough to stack them.

Jackie blinked at her a few times. "Probably not *stacked,* Shauna. Good God."

Shauna shrugged. "How should I know?"

"Okay, so let's start moving them." Lottie tied her hair back with a small amber scarf that she seemed to have procured out of thin air. "I want out of this fucking place. It freaks me out."

They managed to drag four of the six bodies to the designated burning area by the time Misty and Van got back.

“Helloooo!” Misty called out cheerfully, trudging through the front door with a gas can in each hand.

“Oh, good,” Jackie said, gasping for breath. She dropped the arms of the woman that she and Shauna had been dragging across the living room rug.

“*Good?”* Shauna mouthed at her, her brows raised.

Van seemed to share Shauna’s sentiments, because she gave Jackie a look that said *are you out of your fucking mind?* before heading back to the car to retrieve more canisters.

Jackie ignored both of them. “Misty,” she said instead, “what kind of stuff is in your emergency kit?”

“Oh, lots of things!” Misty lifted it off of the kitchen counter and brought it to Jackie. “Why?”

“I’ve never been too worried about the identities of the people I’ve had to… y’know,” Jackie said.

“Kill?” Nat smirked.

“Yeah,” Jackie sighed. “But… the thing is, we don’t know if we want these people identified, right? Like, if they *are* related to us, suddenly we become suspects.”

Shauna truly hadn’t considered anything that far ahead. Apparently she never did before killing. She’d remained unadjusted to the laws of society after their return in so many ways, used to death without consequence. Death for reward, even. But the odds were, between Adam and these fuckers, Shauna was going to spend the rest of her fucking life in prison. She could only hope that Jackie would be sent to the same penitentiary. They could be prison wives, or something.

“Oh, you are *so* on top of things!” Misty said, digging through the bag. “I know exactly what you’re thinking.”

Nat eyed Misty wearily. “Care to enlighten those of us who don’t know exactly what she’s thinking?”

“We, um… I think we need to… pull out their teeth.” Jackie’s delivery was clunky. There was no spinning that into something casual, but it didn’t stop her from trying.

“Oh my fucking God.” Taissa said, sounding more annoyed than anything else. “Do we have any idea how long that’s going to take?”

And there it was. She sounded more annoyed than anything else because she *was* more annoyed than anything else. Because that was exactly who they’d become. Shauna was pulled out of her thoughts by the stark realization that Tai’s question had been directed at her. Misty, Lottie, and Van had turned to her as well, their faces expectant.

Oh, fucking hell.

“Yikes,” Nat hissed, joining the others in throwing the proverbial spotlight on Shauna. “Yeah, I nominate Shipman.”

“What the fuck, guys?” Shauna whined.

“I mean,” Misty brandished a shiny silver tool—a pair of glorified pliers, “it does make the most sense.”

“Did you…” Jackie trailed off.

“No! Jesus, no,” Shauna snapped, crossing her arms against her chest. “I didn’t pull people’s fucking teeth out. Why would I do that?”

“You do have the closest experience.” Tai shrugged. “If we were to line up resumes, yours is definitely the best fit for the, uh… job.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Van said.

Shauna groaned. Misty waved the tool in front of her face until she took it. “Fuck you guys. Misty, please tell me that kit has some gloves in it?”

Shauna wasn’t the only one complaining about the work. Van was particularly disgruntled, having been enlisted by Nat to help in moving one of the remaining bodies, which had fallen all the way in the kitchen.

“I could be at home,” Van grunted, ‘drinking a Jack and Coke on my porch,’ another huge grunt as she yanked particularly hard on his feet, “but no. I’m helping Nat,” she took a deep breath, “Scatorccio,” another gasp for air, “drag a fucking body to the pyre.”

“We had a fucking Jack and Coke,” Nat argued, equally out of breath. “We had a few.”

They dropped the body a few inches from the rest.

“Yeah, well. You get the spirit.” Van stood and stretched her arms. “Fucking old times. Misty, you happy yet?”

Shauna tuned them out, forcing her focus to the horrifying task at hand. She knelt over the smallest woman, probably no older than twenty-five. Jackie had instructed the others in where to move certain fabrics and furnishings. She’d inspected their belongings for any stray lighters—she didn’t trust anyone not to go rogue and, frankly, neither did Shauna—and unplugged all of the appliances.

Shauna could sense Jackie’s eyes on her. Her muscles were aching and she wanted to be fucking done with this and she was so terrified about what Jackie would think of her doing this, even though Jackie was quite literally calling the shots.

Once again reading her damn mind, Jackie swept through the cluttered room with too much grace. She landed, cross-legged on the ground, at Shauna’s side.

“Hi,” she said softly, rubbing Shauna’s shoulder. It felt unbelievably nice to have Jackie’s hand brushing against her. Shauna wanted to lean into it, but she forced herself to keep moving down the row of teeth. It was convenient that this stage of death meant the jaw stayed open for her. She didn’t have to hold it the entire time that she was getting purchase on the teeth, only when she yanked up with the pliers.

“Hey,” Shauna said. “Watch out, I don’t want to hit you when I pull them out.”

Shauna's arm tended to fly back once the root of the tooth released, and, God, she really hated that she now possessed that knowledge, but she knew better than most that everything could become rote, no matter how gruesome.

"Take a break for a sec, baby," Jackie said. "You look exhausted."

She lifted the disgusting pliers out of Shauna's hand and set them on the ground, next to the growing pile of teeth. She looked away quickly, a little pale, but otherwise she gave no discernible reaction. She moved both hands to Shauna's shoulders, guiding her down gently. Shauna sighed and sat back, shoulder to shoulder with Jackie. She kept her gloved hands in front of her, firmly planted on the ground, so that she wouldn't accidently touch Jackie with the filth.

"What are we going to do with those?" Shauna jerked her head towards the teeth.

Jackie wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her in. Shauna let her neck relax, her head falling onto Jackie's shoulder.

"Misty has a plan, and I told her that I don't care *what* she does, as long as I don't have to be a part of it," Jackie said, quietly enough that Misty, who was busy shredding curtains in the kitchen as she talked at Lottie animatedly, wouldn't hear her name and perk up. Jackie rested her cheek on top of Shauna's head and gave her a little squeeze.

Shauna chuckled weakly. "I love that plan."

"Thought you might." Jackie kissed her temple.

"Jax?"

"Hmm?"

"Does this not… freak you out?" Shauna whispered, burying her face in Jackie's shoulder the moment the words left her mouth.

"What? This whole thing?" Jackie asked. "Or you… pulling teeth?"

"Second one." Shauna's voice was muffled by the fabric of Jackie's shirt.

Jackie tugged gently at Shauna's hair until she looked up at her. "Shauna, I suggested it. I know I was a different person to you. I get that I stayed how I was then for you. But… I'm not an angel. Hate to burst your bubble, because I love when people think so highly of me." Jackie grinned down at Shauna, and Shauna flashed her a small smile. "But no, this doesn't freak me out in the way I think you're getting at. Yeah, it's gross. But *you're* not. I love you."

Shauna's smile widened. Jackie pressed her lips against Shauna's chastely, but it was enough to make her practically swoon. Jackie had such an effect on her. It should've been embarrassing, but Shauna was so desperate for her that she didn't fucking care. She couldn't believe how okay Jackie was with all of this shit. With Shauna being this fucked up little dark thing she'd become.

"Love you too, Jax."

“So… this isn’t going to be linked to your name, right?” Van asked. “Your fake name, I mean?” she clarified, when confused faces landed on her.

They’d finished everything. Shauna had watched Jackie, with her hair in a bun on top of her head and a cloth held to her nose and mouth—she didn’t like the smell of the gasoline, go figure—strategically wet certain areas and avoid others. Shauna’d had no idea what the hell the strategy was, but she could tell that there was one. Bodies were prepped, teeth were sealed in a goddamn ziplock baggie in Misty’s purse, and gasoline was poured.

They all stood outside in the spacious backyard, where Jackie had instructed them to hose down every inch of the surrounding grass and plants. (She didn’t want to risk the fire spreading beyond the confines of the house itself. She was a nice, respectful murderer-arsonist.) The women formed a perfect circle. They looked a bit worse for wear, but their clothes were fresh and clean, and they didn’t have any visible blood on their skin. Not bad for midnight, after a day ripped straight from Dante’s fucking Inferno.

“No,” Jackie answered. Even there, in the dull light, she was beautiful. Even then, after murder and mayhem and mutilation, her sweet face and her perfect body and her warm hands were at the front of Shauna’s mind. “The picture associated with the name I used isn’t even of me, and we booked it at an Internet cafe in the middle of nowhere. It’s fine.”

“Damn, Jackie.” Tai looked genuinely impressed, cocking her head to the side and crossing her arms against her chest. “That’s really something else.”

Jackie flashed her a smile, and Shauna felt it in her chest, a light flutter of hope that the two of them could get along. She’d do whatever Jackie wanted, of course. She’d leave Jeff, even Callie—hadn’t she sort of left them already? But Taissa would be a challenge. Theirs was a bridge that Shauna really didn’t want to burn.

“Are we the bad guys?” Jackie asked suddenly, no discernable emotion in her voice or her expression.

“Probably.” Van shrugged.

Nat let out a bitter laugh. “We’re sure as shit not the good guys.”

“Does it matter?” Shauna frowned at her.

“Kind of,” Tai muttered.

“Says the politician,” Lottie scoffed.

“There’s no such thing as good or bad,” Misty said lightly. “It’s subjective.”

Jackie and Nat laughed, Jackie’s shoulders lifting and her chin tilting up ever so slightly, Nat eyeing Misty with amusement.

“Yeah, only the bad guys say shit like that.” Jackie said with a smirk. She looped her arm through Shauna’s elbow and slipped a hand into hers, clinging to her arm. “Oh, well. It is what it is, right?”

Shauna dropped a quick kiss to the crown of her head. “Yeah,” she mumbled into her hair.

“Okay, so… now what?” Nat asked. “I don’t like the idea of sitting around waiting for cops or fucking sweatsuit freaks to show up. Can we do this thing, or what?”

“Yeah, I think we can.” Jackie nodded. ‘Everyone else should head out first. Get a head start. Shauna, are you good with… being here for it?’ Jackie slid a thumb back and forth against Shauna’s arm. She’d always done some variation of that when they were young—touching Shauna while asking for something. Shauna had grown to see it as manipulation. A fucking… tactic. But Jackie’s expression was the same now as it’d been then—open, honest, hopeful. Shauna had lived enough life now to know love when she saw it. She rejected it, usually. Resented it, often. But she could recognize it. Her heart thudded in her chest. Jackie swallowed. “If not, you can ride with somebody else, and—”

“I’ll stay,” Shauna said quickly.

“Great,” Van sighed. “So, are we done for now then? I mean, where do we go from here?”

“I need to go home,” Tai said. “I’ve got work to get back to.”

“Oh, please! We are so not done here, Taissa,” Nat said. “You think we’re just going back to business as usual, now? Really?”

“It isn’t safe, Tai.” Misty placed a tentative hand on her upper arm. “I don’t know what the best plan is, but it isn’t going home alone. We’ve got to stick together, get some rest, and figure out how to approach this thing.”

“As much as I hate to say it,” Van said, “she’s right.”

“At least for tonight,” Lottie agreed quietly.

Tai scoffed, her hands moving to her hips. “Listen, guys. This little reunion has been a blast, but I’m a grown ass woman, and I’m not going to start asking your permission to go to my own home and do my fucking job.”

“Tai…” Shauna drew her name out, searching for a way to rebut her peacefully.

She didn’t have to, because Jackie spoke a breath after her. “Honey, no offense, but you’re chopping up dogs in your basement,” she said. “You’re not going out into the world on your own right now. I’m *really* sorry.”

“Shauna stabbed and dismembered her fucking boyfriend,” Taissa snapped. “And then she lied about it to manipulate us into covering her ass. And you’re *literally* sleeping with her. Everybody just made sure she got away with it, and now we’ve completely moved on. Where’s that energy for me?”

“Somehow,” Nat mused, ‘I feel like the dog thing is worse?’ She posed it as a question, looking to the group for their input. “But it probably isn’t, huh? We’re just that fucked, right?”

Lottie tilted her head side to side in consideration, weighing the options. Jackie nodded a little, but it was unclear what she was agreeing with.

“Mine wasn’t like… a ritual blood sacrifice thing.” Shauna said, rubbing at an ache in her shoulder, stretching her neck to the side. “It was a much more normal, run of the mill, violent crime. I wasn’t trying to do cult shit, I’m just… crazy.”

Jackie cleared her throat. “Well, it doesn’t really matter what’s worse. As much as I’d love to disengage from this whole thing, we need to stick together. We’re weaker alone. They managed to take Nat when she was on her own and she’s, like, the toughest out of all of us. We do need to get out of here, but we need to do it together.”

“Are we making it easier for them, being in one spot?” Van shifted on her feet nervously. “Is that what they want?”

“They clearly have us figured out, anyway. I think going home alone makes it even easier,” Shauna said, avoiding Van’s eyes as she spoke, directing her words to the group at large. “And… this keeps our families safer, don’t you think?” She shifted her gaze to Tai, pleading for her understanding.

That settled it. They chose a hotel a few hours south. There was no real strategy behind the choice, other than putting distance between themselves and the crime scene, and switching up the direction of their travel.

“So much for the Yellowjackets not being seen together,” Van said, hopping into her truck.

Lottie was already in the passenger seat, her forehead pressed against the window and her eyes closed.

“At least we’ll be alive,” Nat yelled as she climbed into the driver’s seat of Misty’s car. Misty took her place in shotgun, and waved in their direction. It was still so fucking odd that they drove together, that they seemed to almost be… actual friends, lately.

Tai had driven herself. Van and Nat pulled out in front of and behind her, respectively. They were going to make sure she arrived at the hotel, Shauna felt confident in that. Jackie and Shauna were left in the driveway alone. A breeze swept dead leaves across their feet. Kindling, Shauna thought vaguely.

And there was Jackie, a box of matches in her hand. Damp brush and snow packed dirt and cold breeze smothering every spark. Shauna’s head began to spin, like too much wine or too many pills or too much pain, and she pulled Jackie into her arms to slow it down. Jackie let out a surprised squeak, but she didn’t make Shauna wait. She immediately wound herself around her, holding her just as hard. When Jackie started to move, Shauna gripped her tight in protest. But she wasn’t straying far. Her nose brushed against Shauna’s and her fingers found Shauna’s jaw and her tongue parted Shauna’s lips. Only a minute, maybe less, but it was enough. Shauna nodded against her and squeezed her hips.

“It’s going to be okay,” Jackie whispered, as she pulled away.

Shauna hadn’t really known that those words were what she’d been chasing but, as soon as Jackie said them, she felt her jaw unclench and her shoulders relax. It was going to be okay. Because Jackie was here and Jackie loved her and Jackie, apparently, knew how to get away with murder.

Shauna watched from the driver’s seat, the car idling at the end of the long driveway, as Jackie flung a lit match onto the trail of gasoline that she’d carefully poured. She didn’t take her eyes off of Jackie for a second. She watched as she calmly jogged to the car and hopped in the open passenger door, the fire spreading slowly behind her. The second Jackie hit the seat, she told Shauna to drive. Shauna did.

She'd wanted to see it, she realized. To watch it all burn. But they wouldn't. They'd drive away and have faith in the work that they'd done. They'd leave the mess behind.

Jackie turned the radio down mid-song, to an almost inaudible level. They'd been driving for a few hours. Shauna was exhausted. She'd hardly slept the night before and, if she was being honest, between the sex and the fighting to the death and the crime scene clean up, she'd done a hell of a lot more physical labor than she was used to. It'd been a long day.

The other women had waited for Shauna and Jackie a mile down the road, lined up on the shoulder. It'd made Shauna feel a strange tug of emotion for them. Love, almost. Or, maybe… the memory of loving them. The exact feeling of being seventeen and having no reason not to love each other yet. Jackie had been silent for most of the ride, fiddling with the radio and the heat. Petting Shauna's arm or holding her hand. Sneaking occasional kisses to her cheek. It'd been an easy silence, especially considering the circumstances. She'd made it clear that she hadn't wanted to discuss the events of their evening, and Shauna had been more than willing to let that shit go.

But now it seemed Jackie was ready to talk about something.

"So…" she said, "we know we're being crazy, right?"

There it was—the natural extension of their *relationship talk.* Shauna had been waiting for this, but she'd hoped it might come after a night of sleep.

Shauna gripped the steering wheel tight with both hands. "Yes."

Jackie seemed relaxed in a way that should've made it easy to assume she had no intentions of drawing back or slowing down or… fucking ending things. But if Shauna had learned anything, it was that she could no longer predict Jackie's next move. She held her breath.

"To the degree that Tai thinks we're like, under a spell," Jackie added, her eyes still on the road.

"Yes." Shauna tapped her thumbs against the steering wheel nervously.

"You're married to Jeff," Jackie said, "and I have a girlfriend who thinks I'm working right now."

"Jackie…" Shauna said. She was beginning to get seriously anxious, she would've greatly preferred it if Jackie sounded upset, because then she'd have some idea of where this was going. She didn't fucking like stoic Jackie.

Jackie seemed to notice her apprehension, finally. She reached over and placed a hand on Shauna's thigh, just above her knee. Shauna released a breath in a giant puff. Her hands were shaking. She gripped the steering wheel even harder to mask it.

"Hey," Jackie said softly, drawing small circles with her thumb. "I'm not saying anything other than what I'm actually saying right now, okay? I want… I want us to be on the same page, Shauna. That's all."

Shauna nodded and glanced at her. Jackie wore another look Shauna knew well. The same exact look she'd given her when the *Van and Jackie* bomb had dropped: earnest, desperate love. This look hadn't changed over the years, either. Shauna knew it well, she just hadn't realized what it meant when they were kids. Her racing heart began to slow.

"Okay?" Jackie squeezed her thigh. Shauna nodded. "Okay. We're both in relationships. But… we had sex. Even before that, we were… acting like we were together, right? Like, almost immediately?"

"Yes." Shauna brought one hand off of the steering wheel to lay it over Jackie's.

"I've still got a lot of… of hurt and anger. About everything," Jackie said carefully, trying to cushion the blow.

Shauna's first instinct was to pull her hand away. She squeezed instead. "Jackie, I—" She blinked away tears.

"No. Just—it's a thing, okay? It's one of our things. I'm not saying it needs to be fixed right now, because it can't be. I just want all the cards on the table," Jackie explained softly. Shauna nodded again, speechless. Jackie Taylor had always and would always possess the power to take Shauna's words away from her. "Right. Okay. And you… you have a lot of hurt and anger towards me."

"Baby…" Shauna choked out, shaking her head fiercely.

She couldn't remember if she'd ever called Jackie that before. If it'd ever slipped out of her mouth—drunk and rutting against her, painfully young and watching her cry over her evil fucking mother, under her breath as she slept beside her. Jackie had always been more fast and loose with the pet names—honey, love, beautiful. (Another thing Shauna had lied to herself about, telling herself that it was just how Jackie was with everyone.) It felt good, calling Jackie that. The hurt and anger that were lurking beneath the surface couldn't hold a candle to that word tumbling out of her lips for this woman.

Baby. Shauna didn't know what else to say.

"You do, Shauna. It's okay." Jackie pushed a stray lock of hair behind Shauna's ear, trailing her fingers down her cheek and her neck when she finished. Shauna nodded, just once. 'Okay.' Jackie said, relieved. Shauna couldn't believe that, didn't understand how Jackie thought it was okay that she was angry, that she had a right. For the millionth time that day, Shauna marveled at her. "And we've changed a lot. Both of us. We don't… I mean, we know each other but we don't—it isn't like this is *new* new, but we are sort of new to each other, now." Clumsier than her usual, too complicated for a neat synopsis.

"I know what you mean," Shauna said gently.

Jackie squeezed her thigh in response. "But… you want me?" she asked.

"God, I want you." Shauna let out a laugh, and the tears started to fall. "So fucking bad."

Jackie went misty eyed, grinning big. "I want you, too." She giggled and wiped at her cheeks. "But, I want… I want all of you. Not like we did before. I don't want to sneak around or… or not call it what it is."

"I don't want that either," Shauna said.

“So, we have some stuff to work out.” Jackie reverted to her *trying to be diplomatic* voice, but Shauna could hear the lingering weight of tears in it. “We have things to work through, but… slowly, I think, because I want to enjoy you. I don’t want to do all the hard shit at once. I want to love you and be with you and… I want us to allow ourselves that—allow ourselves to be happy, because I don’t think either of us have done that in a really long time.”

Shauna lifted Jackie’s hand off of her thigh and brought it to her lips. “Yes,” she said breathlessly. “Please.”

Jackie moved her hand to the back of Shauna’s neck, rubbing small circles at the base of her skull. “Okay, baby,” she said sweetly. They were silent for a few moments, Shauna relishing in Jackie’s touch, until Jackie broke the spell. “But that means… we have people to break up with.” She sounded unsure, afraid to broach the topic.

Shauna sighed deeply. She didn’t want to do this. She wanted to start over with Jackie. To throw away her entire adult life and redo it all, with the right person.

She’d made peace with no longer being with Jeff. Even before Jackie, she’d asked him why they were still together. But she knew it’d be hard on him. Selfishly, she didn’t want to have the conversation. Shauna wanted to cut and run. But he deserved more than that. He’d kept her afloat. She owed him the bare minimum, whether she wanted to face it or not.

“I told you already,” Jackie cleared her throat, “that I’m going to end things with Rachel. Would’ve, even if we hadn’t decided to… and now, fuck—I’m not even sure I can do it in person, what with the whole…”

“Torching an AirBnB with dead people inside it thing?” Shauna supplied, easing some of the tension.

“Yeah.” Jackie let out a breath that was almost a laugh. “That whole thing. But… I’ll figure it out. I won’t be with her anymore, is the point. Regardless of how it has to happen.”

Jackie sounded sad and Shauna hated that she sounded sad and she wondered what it meant about her that she really didn’t feel sad. She felt a lot of things when she thought about leaving Jeff, but sadness simply wasn’t one of them. She hadn’t felt sad when he’d found out about the affair with Adam. Hadn’t felt sad at the thought of him going to prison for her. Just… sad wasn’t part of her feelings when it came to him.

“But… you said earlier you would… were going to—” Jackie faltered, her eyes on her lap. She stopped rubbing Shauna’s neck.

“I will, Jax. I meant it. I promise. It’s just… it’s complicated,” Shauna said. Jackie pulled away. Shauna caught her wrist and brought her hand down onto the console, intertwining their fingers. ‘No. No, it isn’t what you’re thinking, okay? I don’t have any doubts about us. No doubts about not being with him. None. I’m so fucking confident in that. Ridiculously so. I—a little cruelly so, probably.’ She squeezed Jackie’s hand, maybe a little too hard. “I would honestly end things right now. I would. He… Jackie, he knows. He knows how we used to be and how in love with you I’ve always been. It’s not really something I could hide for that long.” Shauna took a deep breath, glancing at Jackie. Her eyes were wide with surprise. “It’s not that. It’s… we have a kid. And we’ve been married for… twenty years. And I don’t… I don’t even work, Jackie. I’m a… a fucking housewife. This isn’t going to be a quick breakup. This is going to be a huge, complicated thing.”

Jackie took her hand out of Shauna's. Shauna's heart picked up speed. *No, no, no.* But Jackie started playing with the end of the braid she'd woven into Shauna's hair earlier, looping it around her fingers. Shauna melted into her, leaning towards her as much as she could.

"And," she continued, "it's not that I'm not willing to do that. To start that now. But, we're sort of… busy with some more pressing issues, right now. I don't think I can multitask all of that and whatever this shit is. And… if you want to wait, if you want to put a pause on this—on us—until I can… then I understand."

"Do you want to pause?" Jackie asked evenly.

"No. God, no. I want… I want to make up for lost time." Tears streamed down Shauna's cheeks again—always with the tears. "What I want is to… hold you and look at you and touch you and—and memorize every fucking change that I didn't get to witness. I want to… love you. That's all I want. I want to give you everything. I—that may be the cheesiest thing I've ever said but fuck, I mean it, Jax."

Jackie giggled and, God, was it music to Shauna's ears. Her hand found Shauna's thigh again, closer to her hip than her knee.

"I like cheesy. I like when you say things like that." Jackie pressed her lips to Shauna's cheek. She lingered, trailing kisses from the apple of it to Shauna's jaw. A chill shot through Shauna's spine. "I don't want to pause, either. That's why I started this whole conversation. We never used to talk about it. We were… impulsive and jumped into things. Which we're, like, totally doing right now, obviously. So, that's the thing. We need to name that. And we need to agree that what we're doing is real and something we both want. That needs to be the difference."

"God, you're a genius, babe." Shauna flashed Jackie a toothy smile.

"Oh!" Jackie pointed quickly to the right.

Nat was turning off into a hotel parking lot. Shauna followed. She parked and unbuckled her seatbelt, turning to face Jackie. *Finally.* She took Jackie's cheeks between her hands.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you, too." Jackie covered Shauna's hands with her own. "Aaaaand, I now declare us officially unburdened by the fact that this is insane behavior. We're doing it right. It's just how it works for us. We're never going to follow a normal timeline, and that's okay. Yeah?" She was crying, but she was flashing Shauna her biggest grin, and she was beautiful, and she was *hers.*

"Yeah, Jax," Shauna whispered, running her thumbs across her cheeks.

And, for the second time that day, they kissed until someone knocked on the windshield.

"Jesus Christ," Nat said. "I can't handle these two acting like horny teenagers."

Shauna blushed. Jackie pulled her sweater closed across her chest.

“They’re more like cute, lovesick teenagers.” Misty shrugged. “I don’t hate it.”

“Good for you, Misty.” Tai said, with a roll of her eyes.

“Okay, how do we want to do this?” Lottie asked briskly. “I’ll get the rooms. I’ve got enough cash to keep it off the books.”

They all stopped short, just before the entrance.

“I don’t think anyone should room alone,” Misty said carefully.

“As much as I hate to say it, I’m with Quigley on that one,” Nat said. “Personal experience.”

“Alright, I got three rooms.” Lottie had come back from the desk to find the rest of the women slouched on the lobby’s chairs and sofas, looking as exhausted as they felt. Shauna wondered vaguely how much cash she’d had to hand over for such a nice hotel to agree to book them without ID or a credit card. Rich people really played by different fucking rules. ‘Shauna,’ Lottie handed her a small envelope, “306 for you and Jackie.”

“Thanks, Lottie,” Shauna said. She was flustered and thrilled at the easy assumption—the immediate decision to hand Shauna the keys for her and Jackie’s joint hotel room. Naturally. The—the what? Couple? Girlfriends? That part she didn’t quite have a hold on.

“Tai and Nat, 308—two queen beds,” Lottie continued. “You good with sharing?”

“Fine by me.” Nat stood and took the envelope from her hand.

“Yeah, let’s go.” Taissa stretched her arms above her head. “I need a fucking shower.”

“Van, Misty—they have a suite with three beds. 311.” Lottie took the handle of her suitcase and started toward the elevators. “I figured we could share. Good?”

“Absolutely!” Misty shoved her glasses up and smiled.

“Yep,” Van said, much less enthusiastic.

“Order all the room service you want, it’s covered.” Lottie was back to sounding far away. They all squeezed onto the elevator together. We can all meet in our room tomorrow. It’s the biggest. What time? Noon?”

“Perfect, Lot.” Jackie smiled warmly. “Thank you.”

“Just remember,” Nat warned as they filed out, “thin walls, you two. I better not hear shit.”

“Oh, God,” Tai groaned.

“Fuck off,” Shauna mumbled, without any real bite to it.

“Get some earplugs from the concierge,” Jackie said cheekily, winking at them.

Shauna bit her lip, grabbing Jackie’s hand and pulling her towards their room. She felt flushed with embarrassment, but she couldn’t really deny how much she loved this side of Jackie.

8. compulsion to pretend

Shauna knew that her body processed adrenaline differently than most. She assumed that this was true of all the women. She'd been told—in great detail, by overly eager psychologists and psychiatrists—that trauma rewires your brain and your body. Stress still prompted the chemical release but, instead of whipping her into a frenzied panic, her body used it to fuel a calm, focused rage. That's what kept her safe. She'd experienced enough instability in her life for her body to trust her with it—don't fix what isn't broken. Shauna knew all of this. And she'd experienced the unique come down that followed it plenty of times, but she wasn't sure she'd ever felt it hit her quite this hard.

Not since they'd left the woods, at least.

She'd noticed the crash trying to start earlier that evening—lightheaded and stumbling to the bathroom, trying to get the blood of the cult freaks off of her hands. (Van's blood, too, she now realized.) But Jackie had followed her and they'd argued and she'd seen just how much Jackie was willing to fight for her. Then another attempt at breaking had come—dizzy, unsteady on her feet, leaning into Jackie for support. But there'd been too much work to be done. It'd had to wait. And the longer it waited, the harder it hit her, building steam as the minutes ticked by. She hadn't really come down from any of it yet. She'd been amped since Misty had called her on that stupid burner phone and said Jackie's name. So, really, it wasn't minutes or hours ticking by—it was days.

The second she closed and locked the door behind them, Shauna's body hit the brakes.

Safe, it said. *See?*

There's a heavy door between you and everyone else

and nobody knows where you are

and I bet you've never heard of a cult attacking people in the middle of a busy hotel

because that just doesn't happen.

Safe.

Safer than ever, really.

Because look who you have.

She's here. With you. Tucked away from the world.

You finally fucking got her.

And you kept her safe.

So, now, no more adrenaline. Just pain and exhaustion, with no warning. A click of a lock and a sudden shooting pain through her shoulder. Just like that. Shauna gasped, letting her bag fall to the ground at her feet.

Jackie spun around immediately, bringing her hands up to Shauna's arms and searching her face.

"Hey, hey, baby." She sounded far away. Shauna couldn't bring her into sharper focus. "What's going on?"

Shauna gritted her teeth and closed her eyes against the pain. It didn't make a fucking dent.

"Just my shoulder," Shauna hissed. "Sore."

"Oh, honey, you should've told me," Jackie said softly. Everything was so soft with her now. (Maybe it always had been, when Shauna wasn't giving her reasons to be harsh.) "I wouldn't have had you drive. I didn't know you were hurting."

"Didn't hurt yet." Shauna drew in a deep, shaky breath. "My back and my head, too. 'M okay. Just need to sit down for a minute." Her words were slurred. They felt thick on her tongue.

"Yeah, yeah, of course. C'mere."

Jackie slipped an arm around her waist and led her to the small loveseat. It wasn't very comfortable, but it was better than collapsing onto the floor. Shauna drew in a sharp breath as she settled onto it and leaned back, dropping her head against the wall. She was so fucking tired. The type of exhaustion that you feel in your bones. The kind that clouds your judgment. The kind that made Shauna want to whimper for Jackie like a fucking child, aching to be in her arms. She kept her lips pressed together.

Jackie was digging through her purse. Shauna shut her eyes again, listening to the sounds of her rummaging—opening the mini fridge, shaking pills out of a bottle, walking back to her side. Shauna opened her eyes when she felt Jackie's weight next to her.

"Take these."

Jackie dropped a handful of pills into her palm, along with an uncapped bottle of water with the hotel's label on it. The chill of it soothed Shauna's throat. She couldn't actually remember if she'd stopped to drink water at all that evening. Probably not. Hadn't eaten most of the day, either. Jackie had seemingly thought the same, because she took the half-finished water from Shauna's hand and replaced it with a bag of crackers. Shauna frowned at her. She didn't have an appetite.

"Eat," Jackie said sternly.

So Shauna did.

She didn't have it in her to argue. She slowly finished what she'd been given, watching as Jackie grabbed herself a bag of cookies and a bottle of water and downed them quickly. Shauna felt drunk with fatigue. Her eyes kept skipping—vibrating side to side quickly and blurring her view. When she could focus, it was Jackie she laid eyes on. Her full lips and the arch of her back and the way her hand wrapped around the bottle as she threw it back.

Alive. Alive, alive, alive.

Jackie moved, bending to retrieve Shauna's pajamas and toothbrush from her bag. She walked briskly to their bed, pulling the covers back. She didn't seem to have questions for

Shauna. She didn't seem particularly alarmed, really. She just moved efficiently, anticipating Shauna's needs. If Shauna had the energy, she might've cried about that.

"Need more food, love?" Jackie paused in front of her. Shauna shook her head. "Okay, let's get you to bed, yeah? Do you wanna just get straight in, or do you want—"

"No." Shauna rubbed a hand over her eyes. "I need to shower." The idea was daunting. It seemed nearly impossible, but getting into bed without washing the evening off of her was a far worse prospect. She let out one small cry. No tears came with it—just a pitiful whine from the back of her throat.

Jackie kneeled in front of Shauna, her hands resting on Shauna's knees, her forehead creased with worry. Shauna waited for her to argue, to try and convince her to get into bed like this.

"Are you sure?" Jackie asked, touching her cheek gently.

"Yeah," Shauna replied shakily. "I have to."

"Okay, shower with me then," Jackie said.

Shauna could hardly believe that she didn't push back. She simply gathered their things and got the bathroom ready for them. Shauna knew that she must look concerningly tired. When she got like this, it usually resulted in Jeff physically carrying her to bed, even as she fought him—wriggling in his arms or kicking her legs out.

"Ready?" Jackie reappeared before her, her hands outstretched.

Shauna let Jackie help her to her feet and guide her to the ensuite. Her entire body ached with the movement, but the sharp pain shooting from her shoulder to her wrist was the most notable offender. Jackie started the water as Shauna leaned against the counter, trying to stretch her shoulder. Nothing soothed the pain.

Jackie began to undress. Shauna watched for a moment, her eyes following her black tee as she lifted it over her head and let it drop onto the marble tile. Jackie slipped her leggings off quickly, tossing them beside her shirt. She was left in the mismatched undergarments that she'd dug out of her bag in a hurry as they'd cleaned their mess—a dusty pink bralette and simple navy underwear.

"Shauna?"

Shauna jumped, forcing herself to make eye contact. Jackie blinked back at her and she realized with sudden, white-hot embarrassment, that she ought to be moving rather than gawking.

"Sorry," she muttered.

Her cheeks burned and she cast her eyes onto the floor. It was like pool parties and locker room showers and skinny dipping in the lake and she was hurting and she was tired and she was—

"No," Jackie said softly. She moved closer, taking Shauna's cheeks between her hands and tilting her face back up to her own. Her eyes were sympathetic—wide and deep and so

beautiful it hurt. “You don’t need to—it’s not—you can look at me, Shauna. You know that, right?”

Shauna nodded once, grimacing against the tears and the pain. Jackie wrapped her fingers around her wrists, guiding her hands to her waist. Shauna held her bare skin, taking in the warmth of it.

“I’m just making sure you’re okay,” Jackie whispered, coaxing Shauna’s forehead to the crook of her neck. They held each other for a few long minutes, Shauna counting Jackie’s steady breaths. ‘My love,’ Jackie murmured. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah,” Shauna mumbled. “Please.”

Jackie slipped her shirt off for her. It was awkward, Jackie tugging on the sleeve until it stretched to avoid putting Shauna’s shoulder in an uncomfortable position. She wrapped Shauna in a hug to unclasp her bra, delicate fingers moving behind her back like sleight of hand. She slipped her own bra and underwear off and sank to her knees in front of Shauna. Shauna felt a rush of gratitude as Jackie guided her hands to her shoulders for balance, silently slipping her jeans and panties off for her. It was a more vulnerable position than she ever allowed herself to be in and she did notice that, but she was so focused on getting clean and getting into bed and so fucking overjoyed that it was Jackie kneeling in front of her, that she couldn’t find it in herself to be properly embarrassed any longer.

Jackie stepped in before her, her back to the showerhead. Shauna shut the shower door behind herself, sealing them in. Steam hit her immediately and fuck, maybe her hurry to bed mission could wait. Maybe she could stay there forever, hot water flowing and Jackie looking at her like she was something precious.

“Here,” Jackie said simply, beckoning Shauna towards her.

She felt a mile away, the fancy shower overlarge. Shauna shuffled toward her—unsure, overwhelmed, awkward. She wanted to reach out and touch her. She wanted to follow the water’s path with her fingers, to skim across Jackie’s hair—a deep red rather than honey-brown, her cheeks—speckled with more freckles than before, her breasts—fuller and heavier, her stomach—softer and less defined. All of her. Shauna wanted to touch all of her all at once, but she was so fucking tired and she was barely clinging to reality as it was.

As soon as she was close enough, Jackie reached for her. She circled Shauna’s hips and urged her closer, until Shauna leaned in, slipping her arms around her neck and resting her cheek on her shoulder. She let Jackie support some of her weight. The water fell over both of them, hitting the top of Jackie’s head first, cascading down her hair and her neck to pour over Shauna’s upturned face. She relished in it. The steam enveloped them and the water relaxed some of the tension in her muscles. It was worth the angry sting from the scrapes on her knuckles.

They stayed like that—quiet and still—until Shauna felt herself drifting close to sleep. She jerked, her shoulder twinging with the small movement, and hissed in pain.

“Okay,” Jackie soothed. She pressed her lips to Shauna’s temple and started working her braid out with gentle fingers. “You’re okay.”

Shauna nodded a bit, her nose nudging Jackie's neck. Jackie managed to grab the shampoo without dislodging her from her comfortable position. She took tiny steps forward, shuffling them so that the water wasn't falling directly over them anymore, and starting working the shampoo into Shauna's scalp. Shauna twisted her face a bit, pressing her forehead to Jackie's shoulder to give her better access. Jackie worked her way up and down her scalp, massaging every inch, spending extra time on the base of her skull. Shauna made small, contended noises, distracted some from the pain. Jackie ran her hands through the length of her hair a few times and spun them around.

Shauna automatically tilted her head back when she felt the spray of the water, but she kept her arms around Jackie, who slipped both hands behind her neck, supporting her so that she could lean further into it. The gentle stretch released some of the tension in her neck and she moaned in relief.

"Good," Jackie mumbled, using one hand to comb through Shauna's locks and rinse away the last of the shampoo.

Shauna tilted her head back up. She was practically nose to nose with Jackie. She could kiss her, if she wanted. She could just pitch forward and press her lips against Jackie's whenever she wanted to and have it be real. That concept was so fucking insane. She tested it, taking Jackie's bottom lip between her own, Jackie's matching her pace. Hazy. Dreamlike. Shauna pulled away to make sure she was actually there.

Jackie smiled, small and warm, and grabbed the face wash. Shauna held her hands out for it. While she quickly washed and rinsed her face, Jackie scrubbed her own hair. They switched spots again, Jackie leaning back under the stream of water. She used one hand to rinse her hair, looping the other around Shauna's waist and pulling her close again. They were so nearly the same height, their hips lining up perfectly when they pressed together like this, Shauna's eyes just an inch above Jackie's when they stood this close.

She watched the suds run down Jackie's neck and chest, resting her hands on her shoulders. Jackie finished rinsing and tilted her head back up, just as Shauna drew a finger across the scar under her collarbone, starting from the outside and moving in towards her heart. She traced the length of it, her finger jumping with the small peaks and valleys. It looked like a tentative cut—not that it hadn't been deep, it must've been—but like someone had changed their mind a few times before pushing on. She wondered who'd cut it, which side they'd started on.

Jackie caught Shauna's hand in her own. She held it, keeping it trapped between their chests, and squeezed her eyes shut. She was centered under the water—it ran down her pretty face and ran off in little streams. Shauna moved to rest her forehead against Jackie's.

"You doing okay?" Jackie asked.

Shauna nodded against her, kissed her gently. Jackie hummed contentedly into her lips. Shauna started washing her body, dragging the cloth across her skin everywhere that she could reach without shooting pain. Jackie quickly washed her face and body, moving roughly compared to the care that she'd tended to Shauna with. Shauna wished her muscles would stop screaming so that she could reciprocate, prayed that everything they'd said to each other was true, that she'd have years to give back.

Jackie rinsed off. Shauna tried to force herself to ignore her throbbing back, so that she could at least bend down to get to her legs. She desperately wanted every bit of the death and gore erased from her. Jackie took the cloth from her and finished the job, wide circles against her back and down her legs. She dug her fingers into Shauna's calves and it felt divine. Shauna groaned.

"Stay here for a minute." Jackie positioned Shauna under the water to let the soap run off, before wringing out her hair and breaking the seal of the shower door to step out.

Cold air rushed in. Shauna cranked the water even hotter, scalding her skin. Jackie dried off quickly, pulling on one of Shauna's tee shirts and a pair of sweatpants. She opened the door again, holding a towel open for Shauna, who cranked the water off and sank straight into her arms.

They brushed their teeth side by side after Jackie helped her into pajamas, their elbows occasionally bumping, just like they'd done every weekend for a majority of their childhoods. Jackie ushered Shauna into bed and laid down next to her on her back, motioning for her to come closer. Shauna pressed her cheek to Jackie's chest, slipped one leg between hers, and let her hand rest just beneath her collarbone.

"Thank you," Shauna whispered, her voice cracking.

"Anytime." Jackie dropped a kiss to the crown of her head and squeezed her close. "Love you."

"Love you, too. So much."

Shauna fell asleep almost immediately, the steady thrum of Jackie's heart in her ear and the rise and fall of Jackie's chest under her hand.

Shauna opened her eyes to a sleep-dazed Jackie, propped up on her elbow, staring down at Shauna with a lazy little smile and wild hair. She'd always gotten the worst bedhead when she slept on wet hair. Seeing it like that, sticking out in various states of waves and curl, made Shauna's heart flutter.

This was the first morning that they'd had together where Shauna could comfortably reach out and touch her without fear of repercussions, knowing with full certainty that she wasn't overstepping. She smoothed Jackie's hair down and rested her palm on the side of her face, running her thumb over her cheekbone. "Hi," she whispered, her voice hoarse from sleep. It'd been blissfully deep and dreamless, for the first time in a very long time.

"Hi." Jackie smiled bigger. She leaned down and kissed Shauna's forehead. "How are you feeling?" she asked, lips still hovering over Shauna's skin.

"Okay," Shauna croaked. Jackie pressed her lips to her forehead again before pulling back to look at her. "What time is it?" Shauna stretched her arms over her head, wincing when it sent pain through her shoulder.

Jackie noticed the wince, frowned for half a second. "It's only eight, you can keep sleeping."

“Mmm, are you gonna stare at me until we have to get up?” Shauna asked with a yawn, grinning when Jackie rolled her eyes.

“I wish.” Jackie laced her fingers through Shauna’s hair. “I need to go get you something for this bad shoulder of yours. I was gonna run to the drug store, but I was deciding whether I should wake you first. I guess maybe I did wake you though… with the staring.”

“I’ll come,” Shauna said quickly, trying to sit up.

Jackie put a hand on her chest to hold her still. “Hey, no, baby. You should sleep. I didn’t mean for you to come with me. I meant… I didn’t know whether you might, like… I don’t know? Freak out a little if I wasn’t here when you woke up?”

Shauna very much would have freaked out. In fact, she was currently freaked out about Jackie going somewhere without her. “You shouldn’t go anywhere alone. And I’m fine. It really isn’t that bad.” She sat up successfully this time, but it came with a grimace and a hiss of a breath that didn’t support her argument.

“Okay, well I’m definitely not believing that, so we’ll just start there,” Jackie retorted, moving to sit in front of Shauna. “The only reason I’m not insisting on taking you to the hospital to get it checked out is because I know that’s a losing battle. But I’m at least gonna get more painkillers and something topical for it.”

Shauna wrinkled her nose. There was no way in hell they could go to a hospital, but maybe Jackie was right about getting something more than the Advil that she had floating around in her purse to deal with the pain. “Okay, well why can’t I go with you?” she asked stubbornly.

“Maybe because you’re in, like, severe pain? And you’re exhausted?” Jackie put a hand on her thigh, rubbing small, comforting circles. “You didn’t sleep hardly at all the night before last and we didn’t get in bed until three-something.”

“I don’t want you going anywhere alone,” Shauna snapped. “Not right now,” she added hastily, registering the startled look on Jackie’s face.

“Is there a specific escort you’ll approve of, hmm?” Jackie said, tone teasing and lips curled back into an easy smile. “Or can I go with anyone?”

Shauna gave a small smile in return, but she shook her head. “I’m not being crazy.”

“Didn’t say you were.” Jackie moved closer and kissed her firmly. Shauna cupped her jaw and thanked her lucky fucking stars that they had only brushed their teeth and gotten in bed about five hours ago. She was not trying to kiss Jackie with morning breath right now. She wanted to preserve some dignity. Jackie pulled away gently. “I’ll get someone to come with me.”

Shauna nodded and yawned again.

“Sleep, baby.” Jackie tugged on her crossed legs, as if she could force her to lay back down.

Shauna laughed and Jackie shimmied to her side, making room for her to sink down into the bed. When Jackie made to get up, Shauna grabbed her hand quickly. Jackie raised an eyebrow.

“I would have freaked out,” Shauna admitted quietly. “If you weren’t here. I…” Her breath hitched. Jackie laid down, still clinging to her hand. “With you here I… I sometimes think that I’m… in a really creative psychotic break. An award winningly insane break from reality. I’m talking Booker Prize level darkness. Because… there’s all of this horrible shit happening and still, this time I’m spending with you feels too… it’s too perfect. Even if we fought, even if it’s hard, it’s still—having you is—I don’t…” she trailed off, eyes welling up with tears. Again with the motherfucking tears. Jackie squeezed her hand. “I’m so fucking terrified that I’m making it up somehow,” she choked out.

Jackie took a few deep breaths. Shauna watched her eyes go glassy. She slid one arm under Shauna’s torso and the other around her waist and pulled her straight into her chest, kissing the crown of her head over and over, holding her tight to her body. Shauna could feel her tears dampening Jackie’s shirt, Jackie’s tears wetting her hair.

“I’m so sorry, Shauna. I’m so fucking sorry that it happened this way. I’m sorry I didn’t get brave sooner. I’m sorry I didn’t come back to you sooner. But I’m here now and this is real. I promise you.”

Shauna nodded into her chest, trying to prevent herself from falling into full on sobs. Once she let go, there was no telling how long it would take for her to bounce back. “I don’t know how to be away from you right now,” she mumbled, pulling back to look at Jackie.

“I get that. It makes sense.” Jackie’s face was tear-streaked. She kissed Shauna—pressed her lips to her cheeks, her forehead, her nose, everywhere she could, as if she had a quota to meet. Shauna caught her lips, working them into a deeper kiss for a few minutes, until she had to break away for air. ‘For the record,’ Jackie said, holding Shauna’s jaw, “I think you could write our story and win a Booker. They’d eat this shit up. Change the names and the circumstances a bit and you’d be set.” Shauna chuckled and grabbed her wrist, holding her hand in place. “I have an idea.” Jackie ran her thumb over Shauna’s bottom lip.

“Is it kissing me again?” Shauna asked, managing a small smirk.

“I always have that idea in the back of my mind, but no. Grab your phone, actually. I have two ideas.” Shauna rolled over to grab it from the nightstand. Before she could turn back to her, Jackie was pressing her chest against her back and reaching for it, her fingers wiggling in front of Shauna’s face. “Camera,” she said simply.

Shauna opened it for her before handing her the phone. Jackie clicked to the front camera and laid her head on top of Shauna’s, so that they were both in frame. Shauna laying on her side with her face pressed against the pillow, smiling sheepishly. Jackie spooning her from behind, cheek pressed to hers, beaming at the camera. She snapped one picture like that, then turned to press a kiss to Shauna’s cheek for another photo, Shauna’s eyes shut and her smile wider. Jackie swiped to video with her thumb, pressed record. She looked down at Shauna, who tilted her face up to meet her gaze. “I love the absolute shit out of you and I’m not going anywhere.” Shauna actually giggled and lifted her head up to kiss Jackie quickly. Jackie stopped the recording and dropped the phone on the bed, satisfied with her work. It was painfully cheesy, but it was also so very Jackie, and that was the point.

“You said you had two ideas?” Shauna asked, rolling onto her back. Jackie swung a leg over her hips and shifted to lay on top of her, propped up on her elbows. Shauna automatically laced her hands behind the small of her back. The weight and warmth of Jackie

made her dizzy with pleasure—Jackie here and alive and hers—so she ignored the twinge her shoulder gave in protest.

"Yeah," Jackie said, "but you're gonna tell me if it's not actually helpful. Like, if it's too weird or… reminiscent of old shit or whatever and we'll just forget about it."

Just as Shauna opened her mouth to ask what in the hell this idea was, Jackie started sucking on the delicate skin beneath her ear. She let out a breathy moan and tilted her head to the side to give her more access. Jackie worked her lips down, kissing and nipping at her skin slowly.

"Is this," Shauna breathed out, "the idea? Because it is reminiscent of old times, but I'm not sure how it could be interpreted as something I don't want."

Jackie chuckled into her neck. "No, that wasn't the idea." She rolled back and they were where they'd started the morning—Jackie on her side looking down at Shauna, Shauna flat on her back, a blush heating up her cheeks and her chest. 'Your neck was just there and I thought it needed some attention. I didn't plan on it.' Jackie shrugged, hair sticking out even more from Shauna raking her fingers through it. "You remember this ring?" Jackie wiggled the middle finger of her left hand, the one that bore the opal on a simple gold band.

"Yeah, your grandma's. I was wondering…" Shauna touched it, the stone cold under her fingers. "Did you take that from your room, too?"

"Oh yeah, it was super Indiana Jones of me, actually." Jackie raised a brow and grinned. 'I had to have a fake made, then I swapped them out in the dead of night. Very dramatic.' She winked down at Shauna. Shauna giggled at her self-satisfied expression. "But… do you see this and think of me? Like, if you saw this would you immediately know it's me and I gave it to you and it's all real?"

"I think so, Jax, but—"

"Do you wanna wear it?"

"I couldn't—"

"Don't do that. Don't do the formality rejection thing. We're beyond that," Jackie insisted, punctuating it with a brief kiss. Shauna still couldn't believe that was just a thing they did now. Jackie Taylor was alive and she was there and Shauna could kiss her and touch her any fucking time she wanted to. (Shauna snuffed out the fire in her brain that kept trying to tell her that it wouldn't last.) "If you don't want to, if it's too, like… y'know?" Shauna did know. The necklace. But this felt different to her.

(Or maybe she just desperately wanted to watch Jackie slip a ring on her finger.)

"No, I—let's try it. Just while you're gone." A warm flush crept up Shauna's neck.

Jackie slipped it off, took Shauna's right hand in hers, and pushed it onto her ring finger. "You end up hating it, take it off. If not, it's yours," Jackie said, far too casually. Shauna stared up at her with wide eyes. She didn't have words for this, but Jackie didn't pause long enough for her to speak anyway. "I'm gonna go to the store now, yeah? You want anything in particular?"

Shauna shook her head, attention still fixed on the ring.

And, oh, she could pretend. Pretend that this meant something different. Pretend that it was a token of something, not just a reminder that Jackie was alive, so that she didn't have to check in with Shauna before running a fucking errand. Grade school, when she pretended to marry Jackie, back before they knew what marriage really was. When it was all pretty dresses and cake. Middle school, when she pretended that Jackie was her girlfriend, back when they practiced for kissing boys. When Shauna knew, deep down, that she'd be more than okay with only ever kissing Jackie. High school, when she pretended that everything they did was normal. That everyone makes out with their best friend and sleeps curled into them and dreams about them and loses their fucking mind when someone else touches them.

Except it wasn't pretend. She hadn't been alone in those moments and she knew it now. Jackie had felt the same damn way she had. They were in it together. They'd always been in it together, but Shauna had never been able to pull her head out of her ass to see that, to notice the way that Jackie looked at her, to consider that when Jackie cried as they sobered up—on those nights that they got closer than friends do—they were tears of heartbreak, not regret.

She'd made assumptions and she'd grown bitter and she'd pushed down her own feelings and blamed it all on Jackie. So maybe Shauna should consider the possibility that Jackie also saw the significance of slipping a ring onto her finger. When Jackie had finally touched Shauna, she'd made her earn her orgasm with promises of devotion. She'd told her that she wanted to be with her—immediately decided to leave her girlfriend for her. So why was Shauna giving in to the compulsion to pretend this was unrequited love?

"Shauna?" Jackie's gentle voice cut through. She ran her fingers through Shauna's hair, scratching her scalp lightly.

"No." Shauna cleared her throat when she heard how weak her voice sounded. "Whatever you think will work is fine. But… if nobody can go with you, come back and—"

"And get you, yeah, yeah. I'm not going anywhere alone, babe, chill." Jackie kissed her again and God, Shauna could get used to this—losing track of how many times they'd kissed in a morning. Not having to count them and hold onto them, trying to remember every single detail. "Please try to sleep some more. I shouldn't have kept you awake this long." Jackie frowned.

"It's okay. I'm still sleepy." Shauna forced a showy yawn. There was no way in hell that she was going to sleep while Jackie was gone. She would still much rather go with her, but she needed to avoid seeming crazy clingy. At least for now.

Jackie fixed her hair into a messy bun and placed her sunglasses on top of her head. She shoved her wallet and keys into her pockets, and headed out—still in the sweats and tee shirt that she'd slept in and, in Shauna's opinion, that might've been the most shocking thing that Jackie had done since she'd come back.

Shauna actually did doze for a few minutes, her beat to shit body overriding her anxious mind. A quiet knock on the door roused her. She jumped up and ran to it, her heart thudding. She looked through the peephole to find Lottie, also in pajamas, with a large tote bag in her hands. Shauna swung the door open. "Hi, Lottie," she said quietly.

"Hi. Jackie came to our room. She went out with Van and Misty, so I figured you were here." Lottie gave her a cautious smile and waited for a beat. There was an awkward silence.

“Can I… come in?”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, of course, come on.” Shauna stepped to the side. She’d been subconsciously blocking the entrance, just as she had when Lottie had tried to leave the house last night. Fucking hell. She was going to have to apologize to Charlotte fucking Matthews. Fuck her for everything. For all of it. For out there. For keeping Jackie away. For lying and scheming and being a fucking crazy cunt. (But Jackie was alive. She was alive. Shauna had her. No one could know for certain what would’ve happened if Lottie hadn’t—fuck.) Shauna tried stretching her shoulder again as she backed up. Sharp pain shot down to her outer wrist. She winced and let her arm fall to her side.

“I brought these for you.” Lottie held up the bag and shut the door behind her. “Your… journals.”

Bless her, the crazy fucking bitch.

“Oh, thank you. For… buying them and keeping them and all of it. And… Lottie, I’m really sorry about last night.” Shauna tried desperately to sound genuine, wondered why it was so goddamn hard to force herself to sound genuine, even when she did mean it. “I was… out of line. I never should’ve acted like that. Really. I’m… uh, sorry.” She was sorry. She’d manhandled her, thrown her to the ground, threatened to kill her—even if that threat had mostly been directed at Van, it was technically about Lottie. But Shauna had never learned how to properly apologize. More often than not, she felt as if she was faking it.

Lottie shrugged, her eyes darting around the room, like she was scared to make eye contact for too long. “Van riled you up. It wasn’t a kind thing to do, but you panicked and felt backed into a corner and then someone started poking at you and… well, I do know you, Shauna. I know you like that, at least. You can’t help it.”

Shauna didn’t know what to say. That was the problem with apologies—you say what you have to say and then the other person gets their turn and sometimes they throw you so off balance you aren’t sure what the conversation is even about anymore. “I… thanks, I guess? Riled me up feels a little like I’m a chihuahua or something, but I’ll take it.”

“I call ’em like I see ’em.” Lottie laughed a little. Shauna’s lips twisted into a genuine smile for her—this wild girl, who’d made Shauna feel everything so intensely, encouraged her to be feral and free and settle into her anger and her loss and her love and her pain. Shauna loved the crazy bitch as much as she hated her. Lottie’s smile dropped and she chewed her lip, looking past Shauna again. ‘There’s more in here,’ she lifted the bag, “than just the journals. Can I sit for a minute?”

“Oh, yeah.” Shauna motioned to the loveseat. “Sure.”

They both sat, Lottie fidgeting with the tote bag in her lap.

“I…” Lottie cleared her throat, turned to face Shauna and finally made sustained eye contact. ‘I wanted to tell you about Jackie. After we got back. Not right away but… later. I felt responsible for your pain, in a way. I thought—no, I knew how much you loved each other. And being back in the world, it seemed like you ought to be… I don’t know,’ she shook her head. “The point is that I couldn’t tell you. It was a mess and I couldn’t undo it. It… wasn’t my place to overstep like that.” She sounded sincere. Seemed a little like her old self, even—kind in her directness.

"Oh, I—"

"But," Lottie's brown eyes went wide and her jaw set with determination, 'I think I am going to overstep right now. I don't know how she's going to feel about this, but… I think I owe it to you.' She reached into the bag and took out a shoe box—Jimmy Choo, Shauna almost snorted in laughter at that—setting it on the coffee table in front of them and dropping the bag to the side. "Jackie never kept photos of herself. And—Shauna, she's lived this great, big life. Really, she has. She throws herself into life. A lot of us withdrew, but not her. She's… well, she's Jackie. She made Van and I get out more than we ever would have."

Shauna narrowed her eyes and wrinkled her nose. She wanted to grab the box and push Lottie out the door. She sat on her hands.

"She loves a good distraction," Lottie chuckled. "Anyway, she rarely took pictures. But I did. She didn't want them, so I hung onto them and… when I realized we would be seeing each other, I just… I guess I felt compelled to go through them for you. I wasn't around for every phase of her life, but we were in touch a lot throughout the years. She's had to be so many different people. Change up her looks and her interests and everything. And she doesn't really like looking back. But I thought—I just thought this would be important to you. I don't think she'll be mad really, but… if she is, then you can blame me."

Shauna's heart felt dangerously close to beating straight out of her chest. "Lottie, I—" her voice cracked. Lottie placed a tentative hand on her arm. "Thank you," Shauna choked out. Lottie nodded and gave her arm a gentle squeeze before standing.

"I'm not saying she wasn't impacted as much as the rest of us were. She just dealt with it differently. She… leaned into the performative happiness, you know? But she… missed you every day. You're the only thing I ever saw her really cry about. Anyway," Lottie swallowed, "I'm heading back to my room. Got to mentally prepare for this day."

Shauna murmured something in response, her eyes locked on the box in front of her. She barely noticed Lottie shutting the door behind her. With trembling hands, she pulled the lid off, setting it aside carefully—a bomb that might detonate with too much movement.

So many fucking pictures.

A hundred, at least. Maybe more. She carried the box to the expanse of floor between the bed and the couch and laid photos out around her until she was surrounded, drifting in a sea of Jackie. They were all dated, most had locations or events written on the back.

London '00, First Published Work. Jackie seated at an outdoor dining table with platinum blonde hair, wearing a yellow sun dress. Sunglasses on top of her head. An amber beer in one hand and an unmarked black book in the other. Beaming at the camera.

Dublin '10. Jackie with cropped dark hair and blunt bangs. A cigarette between her lips. A black bomber jacket worn open over a tight emerald top. Flipping off the camera.

LA '01, Van's Birthday. Jackie and Van, leaning over a pool table. A cue in Jackie's hand. Van hugging her from behind and kissing her cheek. A red bandana covering her hair. Her eyes shut and cheeks smushed.

Marseille '15. Jackie on the beach, wearing a black bikini. White sand and turquoise water beside her. Tanner than Shauna had ever seen her. Huge tortoiseshell sunglasses and a cocktail

raised in toast to the camera.

NYC ’03, Rent. Jackie posing for the camera, her arms above her head and her leg kicked to the side. Dressed head to toe in baby pink. Frosty eye shadow and thick lipgloss that somehow looked fucking good on her.

Ottawa ’18. A selfie of Jackie, Van, and Lottie, looking much like they did now. Their hair windswept.

Portland ’04. Jackie looking back over her shoulder cheekily. Her hair long and wavy. Low rise jeans and a tight cropped tee. Keys dangling in her hand.

Nashville ’12. Jackie laughing with Lottie in someone’s kitchen. Her hair auburn—close to its current color, but shoulder length. Flour dashed across her nose.

Montreal ’07. A candid photo. Jackie staring out the window of what looked like a café. A mug to her lips. Her hair dyed pastel pink and braided in the front.

Toronto ’99, Lilith Fair. Jackie—blonde again—in a cropped tank top. A red and black checkered flannel around her waist. Light wash jean shorts. Leaning into a pretty woman with dark hair, one of her hands in Jackie’s back pocket and a joint in the other. Both of them looking faded.

Jackie fucking Taylor went to fucking Lilith Fair.

One photo stood out to Shauna. Jackie sat on a dark hardwood floor, surrounded by open luggage. The contents were jumbled, like they’d been packed in a hurry or scrambled through upon arrival. In most of the photos she was flashing a grin—even the candids—but in this one she looked distant. No smile, her eyes even wider than usual and slightly hazy. She wore an oversized black sweatshirt that fell just above her knees. Her legs were crossed beneath her. No makeup, paler than usual, her hair pitch black and held up in a ponytail on top of her head with a silver scrunchie. Shauna flipped it over to read the back.

Berlin ’01, Moving Day.

It was a beautiful picture. Of course it was—it was Jackie. But Shauna couldn’t understand why it was in with all these seemingly happy memories. The date printed across the bottom read 10.18.2001. Shauna slipped it back over, staring at the girl in the photo. She had an overwhelming urge to hold her.

The door swung open slowly. Jackie had a shopping bag on her arm.

“Shoot, I was hoping you’d be—” Jackie stopped abruptly, her jaw dropped, her gaze darting around the mess of photos. She sighed and dropped the bag on the ground, shutting and latching the door behind her. ‘Oh.’ She sighed. “Lottie?”

Shauna nodded silently. There was no emotion on Jackie’s face or in her voice. She just slipped her sunglasses off and dropped them on the nightstand.

“I missed so much, Jax.”

“Mmm.” Jackie dropped to her hands and knees, delicately stacking enough of the photos to make room for herself next to Shauna. She wrapped an arm around Shauna’s shoulders. ‘Yeah, we both did. I saw the pictures on your walls. That was quite the wedding dress.’

Jackie kissed the side of Shauna's neck. "But… I think we would've missed it anyway. Not this much but… we weren't gonna bounce back from that fight. Not when we were… eighteen and stupid. And it was gonna happen, crash or no crash. Even if we made nice, I think—I think we would've fallen apart for a while."

She ran her fingers through Shauna's hair as she said it, scratching little circles against her scalp.

Shauna hummed and nodded. "I think you're right."

"We were gonna have to find ourselves no matter what."

"I never found a life that wasn't about you," Shauna mumbled, her voice weak, barely audible.

Jackie turned to face her. Shauna stayed stubbornly in place—her head down and her hands in her lap. Jackie didn't try to force her to turn. She just laid her forehead against her temple. "I'm sorry," she whispered into Shauna's ear.

"I love you so much," Shauna said. She did. She loved Jackie so fucking much. She just wished that love could stop smothering her.

Jackie slipped behind Shauna, leaning against the foot of the bed and kicking her legs out on either side of her.

"Scoot back," she begged, gripping Shauna's hips and tugging gently. 'Please,' she added, leaning forward to murmur it against Shauna's neck. Shauna sighed and pushed herself back into Jackie's arms, resting her head against the side of Jackie's neck. Jackie draped her arms across Shauna's stomach and Shauna started twisting the opal ring back and forth with her thumb absently. "I love you, too. You know that right?"

"Yes," Shauna said softly.

They sat like that for a few minutes, Jackie tracing shapes on her stomach.

"You looked so gay." Shauna broke the tension. She could feel the vibration of Jackie's laugh throughout her entire back.

"About that. There's something I have to tell you," Jackie said, attempting to lace her tone with false sincerity. "Don't freak out."

"It's okay. I sort of figured it out when you fucked me." Shauna achieved a much more successfully serious tone. Jackie laughed again—such a pretty, deep sound. 'I just mean… when we were kids you looked actively not gay.' Shauna reached for the Lilith Fair picture and waved it in front of Jackie's face. "And this… this is so gay."

"Mmmm, yeah. Republican parents in the nineties for ya." Jackie dropped a kiss to her cheek. "You definitely looked gay, though, and yet you were just as deep in the closet as I was."

"Oh my god." Shauna laughed. "Flannel alone does not a lesbian make."

"No, but the flannel and the writing and the little broody looks," Jackie pecked her cheek twice and they both giggled, "while you listened to Liz Phair and read Dorothy Parker sort of

did give a lesbian vibe."

"Okay, I'll give you that." Shauna sat up to face Jackie. "So… you don't like men at all, right?"

"God, no." Jackie stretched her arms above her head and cracked her neck. "I never have."

"Did you always know you were a lesbian?"

"Not always, no. I thought we were all just pretending that we liked boys. Like, I thought it was a big act. And I thought everyone found women attractive. It clicked the first time you kissed me, actually." Jackie leaned forward to stretch her legs, something Shauna had seen her do countless times. She reached for her without thinking, grazing her calf. Jackie smiled. "Really kissed me, I mean. With tongue." Jackie wiggled her brows dramatically.

Shauna scrunched her nose. "Oh my God." She threw her head back in a laugh.

Jackie chuckled. "I stayed in denial for… maybe, like, a month? After that, I knew. The rest was just me hating myself for it. Until we got back and then it didn't matter. Nobody knew who I was and I knew that what people thought of me didn't mean shit. So yeah, then I started looking gay." She grinned.

"You knew when I kissed you?" Shauna asked quietly.

"Yep." Jackie sat up and tucked her legs under herself, turning to face Shauna fully.

"New Year's?" Shauna chewed her lip. She had no clue why she'd let that slip. It was fucking embarrassing, hanging onto the tiny details like that. She'd just gotten so fucking used to not having anything else of Jackie to grasp onto. The details meant everything to her. But Jackie probably didn't even remember the actual—

"Uh-huh." Jackie smiled, her expression dreamy, and pushed Shauna's hair behind her ear. "Freshman year."

"And you didn't say anything?"

"Again, the whole denial followed promptly by self-hatred thing. But also… you do like men, too?"

Shauna thought about it. She mostly just liked Jackie (and women that looked vaguely like Jackie), but she couldn't exactly say that. "Yeah. Both always, I guess."

"Yeah. I just—I don't think I even knew what a bisexual was at that point, if I'm being honest. I thought… Shauna likes boys, this is just for fun, and I should take what I can get." Jackie shrugged.

"We were so fucking dumb."

"Uhhh, yeah. The dumbest. That's sort of the whole thing," Jackie teased.

Shauna leaned in, pressing their lips together firmly. She took Jackie's waist, holding steady just beneath her ribcage. Jackie smiled against her and Shauna slipped her tongue past her lips, swallowing her happy little noises.

“What about this one?” Shauna asked, breaking the kiss to point at that last photo she’d seen. *Moving day.*

“Oh, God,” Jackie sighed. ‘She put this in here on purpose.’ Shauna frowned at her, prodded her knee to spur her into saying more. “Fuck, okay. Well… that was actually taken on your… um, wedding day, she just had it printed later.” Jackie pointed at the date, avoiding Shauna’s gaze.

Shauna took Jackie’s hand and pulled it onto her lap, massaging it with both of her own nervously.

“My… my wedding day?” Shauna choked out.

“Mhmm. I, uh—” Jackie coughed. She licked her lips and finally met Shauna’s eyes. “I knew when big things happened for you, y’know?”

Shauna hadn’t thought about it, but of course she would’ve. The others did, it only made sense that word would get back to Jackie. And regardless, Shauna’s life—especially back then—had always been more public than she would’ve liked.

“That makes sense,” Shauna said carefully.

“I had—well, Shauna, I’d booked a ticket to Jersey for that week. I was gonna show up. Not to crash the actual wedding or anything, but—actually, I don’t know.” Jackie scrunched her nose. “Maybe I would’ve. It would’ve been pretty dramatic and I was feeling very dramatic about the whole thing. But… I didn’t have a plan. Just a flight.”

“You—I—you what?” Shauna knew that her mouth was hanging open. She could hear her heart bounding, the thumping loud in her ears.

“I was gonna tell you I was alive. I thought… I guess I thought that maybe it would change things for you. I still thought you probably really hated me but I still loved you and I wanted you and the idea of you married to him made me so… fucking sick.” Jackie shook her head.

“It would’ve changed everything,” Shauna whispered, eyes wide.

“I know that now, baby. And I would’ve done it. I’m sure of that. But… we were twenty-three, yeah? So… like I told you, that guy showed up. The one who was hired to track me down. And I realized it wasn’t safe. I couldn’t take the risk.” Jackie closed her eyes, a touch longer than a blink. Shauna felt tears sliding down her cheeks. Jackie brushed them away with her free hand, her own lips pursed against shakiness. “It was stupid to think that I could just show up in Wiskayok without something bad happening, especially that soon after everything. It was too dangerous, so… I got on a plane to Berlin instead. Moved in with Lottie. It broke my fucking heart.”

Jackie gave a sad smile, one that looked exactly like the smile that Shauna’s hallucinations of her wore.

Shauna’s heart ached.

“Jackie?” Shauna whispered.

At Jackie’s insistence, they’d tucked the photos back into their box. Shauna had made her begrudgingly promise that they could sit down and go through all of them eventually. Jackie had massaged the topical analgesic she’d picked up into Shauna’s shoulders and back, made her take more painkillers, and demanded that she get back into bed with her to try to get some more sleep before they had to go meet with everyone else.

They’d been laying in silence for roughly ten minutes.

“Yes, love of my life, who’s supposed to be asleep right now?” Jackie replied, voice muffled by her pillow.

Shauna blushed at the wording. She was near certain that her whole body had instantly gone pink. “I… can’t sleep. I’m too awake now.” Shauna mumbled like a kid, tapping Jackie’s shoulder at the sleepover because all the other girls were asleep and she didn’t want to be the only one awake.

“Hmm.” Jackie sat up a little and looked down at her. Shauna was still blushing, she could feel it in her chest, her cheeks. “I feel like I remember a pretty foolproof way to get you to sleep.”

Jackie moved like water, pouring over Shauna and filling all the space around her. She slid a hand into Shauna’s hair, a leg between her own, an arm across her chest, her lips against her jaw.

Shauna shivered at the contact. “I… fuck, I don’t think I can right now,” she whimpered, even as she dug her head back further, lifting her chin for Jackie. “My shoulder.”

“Who said anything about you moving?” Jackie worked her way down Shauna’s neck. Her fingers snuck beneath Shauna’s thin cotton tee to trail up her side.

“But then you—fuck—” Shauna broke off when Jackie’s hands found their way to her chest. She cupped her breasts, pushing them up and burying her face between them where Shauna’s tee formed a deep-v. “I can’t—oh—” Jackie rolled Shauna’s nipples between pinched fingers, nudging her cleavage with her nose and nipping at her skin softly. Shauna’s hands flew up to grip the back of her head. Pain came with the sharp movement, but she ignored it. “But you won’t get to—”

Jackie cut her off with a firm kiss. Her tongue slid sloppily between Shauna’s lips and against her teeth. She was needy. Desperate and insistent. Shauna’s clit throbbed. Jackie tore her lips away.

“But,” Jackie breathed into Shauna’s neck, kneading her breasts, ‘I get to fuck you until you come and watch you fall apart and then I get to hold you while you sleep and I very much like that plan.’ Shauna couldn’t choke down her moan. She needed to touch Jackie, her stupid fucking shoulder be damned. She reached for the waistband of her sweats, but Jackie jerked her hips away. “Uh-uh,” Jackie shook her head. “Just let me have you. That’s all I want, baby.” Jackie’s fingers headed south, her palm sliding across Shauna’s stomach and leaving scorched skin in its wake. She trailed her tongue back up, moving so that she could breathe directly into Shauna’s ear. “What do you think of that plan?”

Shauna turned to catch Jackie's lips, immediately prodding at them with her tongue. Jackie smiled before obliging. She tugged at Shauna's bottoms until she lifted her hips. Shauna whimpered into Jackie's mouth, but Jackie broke the kiss quickly to slip them off. Shauna hadn't put underwear on the night before—it'd seemed like a needless step between her and sleep. And now, for this, it seemed like a very welcome acceleration.

Jackie was between her legs like lightning, laying on her stomach with her feet kicked up behind her. She drew two fingers into her mouth to wet them and holy shit, Shauna couldn't believe that she'd never had that exact fantasy, because she wanted to bottle the feeling that seeing that gave her. Apparently Shauna's expression had given her away—Jackie smirked at her and brushed her clit lightly with her fingertips.

"Fuck, fuck," Shauna moaned, instantly twitching into Jackie's touch. Jackie held eye contact as she worked—fingers circling Shauna harder, lips moving up and down her inner thigh. Shauna whimpered and laced a hand through Jackie's hair, propping herself up on an elbow to watch her and—

And Jackie stopped.

What the fuck?

Jackie pulled her hand away, even as Shauna bucked her hips and whined. She tore her lips away, a thin line of spit connecting her mouth and Shauna's inner thigh for just a second, but fuck was a second long enough to make Shauna drip. And she glared at Shauna a little bit.

"Jax, wha—"

"You're gonna hurt yourself worse, you need to just lay back and relax."

"Jackie," Shauna groaned, sounding like—well, probably like a petulant teenager who didn't want to have to defend her poor choices, if she was being honest.

"Shauna." Her hunch was confirmed when Jackie mocked her tone, letting out a breathy laugh. "I mean it."

She pressed one more kiss to Shauna's thigh before sitting up. Shauna pouted, her mind still taking a break from coherent sentences.

"Here." Jackie looped an arm behind Shauna and pulled her up a bit. Shauna sat, arms around Jackie's neck, and immediately started sucking on the skin at the base of it. Jackie hummed appreciatively, fussing with something behind Shauna's back. She craned her neck out of Shauna's reach—Shauna whined again—and lowered her down. Shauna was propped up on two of the overstuffed hotel pillows. Jackie kissed her sweetly and moved back to her previous position, between Shauna's open hips. 'There,' she dropped a kiss to Shauna's thigh, "you can still look at me."

She winked at Shauna and immediately ran her tongue down her center and since when was unironic winking actually that fucking sexy?

Jackie watched Shauna's face, sucking and licking around her entrance, occasionally dipping her tongue inside her and curling it. Shauna's thoughts were hazy—mostly centered on Jackie's pretty eyes and her tousled hair. The way her tongue could reach so deep and her fingers circled so roughly. Shauna was reduced to wordless moans almost immediately. Her

eyes shut and her head rolled side to side of its own accord. Jackie let her card her hands through her hair, now that her back was supported. She felt the knot of pressure start to build and tugged hard.

Her legs were shaking, she was using every ounce of her willpower not to arch her sore back, terrified that Jackie would stay true to her word and stop. Her knees flinched, as if to snap shut, but Jackie moved too quickly for them. She used her elbow to secure one leg and gripped Shauna's thigh with her free hand, pushing her open. The knot was tightening. Her clit ached. Jackie was making messy, sloppy sounds with her tongue buried deep inside her and Shauna didn't understand how she was even breathing. She glanced down at her and met her eyes and so much hit her in that moment.

Jackie, who'd so lovingly taken care of her the night before, who'd propped her up on these stupid pillows,

and Jackie, who'd sweet talked her and fucking dirty talked her and worked her up into a frenzy in seconds,

and Jackie, who'd broken her heart so many times and held the power to do it all over again,

and Jackie, who'd slipped a fucking ring on her finger earlier that morning,

and Jackie, who was dead less than a week ago.

Jackie, and her hazel eyes boring into Shauna's own, her tongue inside her, her arms spreading her open so that she could devour her, her fingers pushing her over the edge.

The pressure snapped loose. Shauna wasn't just loud. No, she was screaming. Her head fell back and her entire body shook. The release was more than just physical. Jackie didn't stop, didn't shush her, didn't remind her that they were in a hotel, next door to their friends, who would surely give them hell for this in a few hours. She kept moving, letting Shauna ride it out for a few long minutes until her body demanded that she stop.

And, when Shauna finally finished, Jackie laid with her, pulling the comforter over both of them. She wrapped Shauna in her arms, kissed her sweaty forehead, and let her pass out—physically and emotionally spent.

9. bullet for you

2001

"So… marriage, huh?" Tai swirled her drink lazily on the bar top, shooting Shauna a sideways look—her attempt at playing it casual. Shauna saw right through it. "That's big."

"Yeah, I guess." Shauna shrugged. She'd peeled the label off of her beer the second it'd been set in front of her. She shredded it into strips slowly. "Will you be in the wedding?"

"Will I—like, as a bridesmaid?" Tai covered Shauna's hand with her own. "Are you asking me to be one of your bridesmaids?"

Shauna kept her gaze down. She gripped the torn shreds of paper in her hand, closing it into a fist now that she couldn't fidget with them. Her nails slid against her skin. "The bridesmaid, yeah," she mumbled quietly. "Small wedding. One bridesmaid. So… Maid of Honor, I guess?" She met Tai's gaze—widening her eyes, begging for compliance.

"Yeah. Yeah, of course, Shauna. But—" Tai squeezed her hand. She kept it balled in a fist. "I just—are you sure you even want this?"

"I don't really have any other friends," Shauna mumbled. She chewed her lip, willing Tai to take her hand away.

"No, no—not that. I'm happy to be your Maid of Honor, but only if you actually want to get married. I meant, are you sure about this marriage?"

"Oh." Shauna shook her head a little, dazed. It didn't fucking matter what she wanted. She didn't get to want. She'd made her choice years ago. "I think so? I don't know what else I'd do. He… treats me well. He doesn't mind that I'm…" She took another sip of her beer, holding it in her mouth until it was warm and flat and unpleasant on her tongue before swallowing it down. Tai finally stopped trying to persuade Shauna to unfurl her hand. She went back to twisting the torn pieces of the label between her fingers. "Yeah. I'm sure."

Tai frowned at her. Shauna felt the hot, familiar sting of tears trying to form.

"You aren't alone in this world. You have me," Tai said earnestly. "You don't have to marry him if you don't want to. I… I'm just not sure that this is a good idea."

"You don't have to be in the wedding. We can just go to City Hall or something."

"Shauna, stop. You know that isn't what I'm saying. Do you care about him? Do you love him? Because if not, do you think this is gonna be a good thing for either of you?"

Shauna paused for a long while before answering. The pieces of the label were tiny, but she kept trying to make them smaller. She couldn't help herself, her nails digging into her flesh when she tried to rip them and lost her grip. "I think… sometimes I think that she's the only person I ever really cared about," she said simply. "And look what I did to her."

Taissa cried. Shauna didn't.

She pulled her hands into her lap before Tai could try and touch them again. “I don’t think I’m meant to be a good thing in people’s lives.”

PRESENT

A series of sharp knocks on the door jolted Shauna awake. She and Jackie were both leaning against the pillows that Jackie had propped Shauna up on, Shauna wrapped in Jackie’s arms, her head against her chest. There was a spot of drool on Jackie’s shirt where Shauna’s mouth had been. Gross, fuck.

Shauna pulled back to look at her. She was blinking rapidly, adjusting to the forced wakefulness.

“Shauna?” Tai’s frantic voice.

Bang, bang, bang.

Shauna went to pull the covers back, saw her bare thighs, remembered. Oops.

“Shauna? Open the fucking door! Jackie?” Taissa said Jackie’s name quieter, like she wasn’t sure if she was allowed to in public.

Actually, Shauna wasn’t sure whether they *were* supposed to or not.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang.

“Are you guys in there?” Tai sounded annoyed frantic, not our lives are in danger frantic.

Shauna was still trying to come out of her deep sleep, her whole body aching, but Jackie was on her feet already, moving through the room. Shauna yanked the covers up to her chin out of reflex.

“Fuck, okay. Hold on.” Jackie unlatched the lock. She swung the door open right as Tai was about to rap her fist on the door again. The uninterrupted momentum of her arm caused her to stumble forward a little. “What the hell is going on?”

Jackie gripped Tai’s waist to steady her. Tai straightened herself and Jackie pulled her into the room.

Tai gave Shauna a once over. “Are you seriously naked right now?” She shook her head and tapped her foot impatiently.

“No!” Shauna snapped. She paused, scrunching her nose. “I… have a shirt on.” She loosened her hold on the covers, letting them drop some.

“Oh my God,” Tai groaned, rolling her eyes. “Well, you might wanna add some pants to the equation, because your husband and kid are in the fucking lobby right now.”

“What?” Jackie and Shauna asked in tandem.

Jackie’s mouth hung open, her forehead creased. Shauna pinched the bridge of her nose, confusion so thick it made her temples throb.

“How? What?” Shauna shook her head a little to clear it.

She glanced around the room for her damn pants, but they were nowhere to be found. Maybe she was still asleep. Maybe this was a nightmare and she'd wake up in Jackie's arms for real and they'd laugh about the way she was Donald Ducking it and they'd order room service and Shauna would forget all about this nasty dream. She clenched her fist tight. The band of Jackie's ring dug into her skin sharply.

Awake.

Shit.

"I have no clue!" Taissa snapped. "I was getting coffee and I saw them walking in. I made some dumb shit up to stall them. Told them to wait in the lobby. So you need to get down there and deal with them."

"Okay, okay, I'm going. I just need—"

Jackie looked like she was trying to be subtle, as she slipped Shauna's pajama bottoms into her hands. She really did. It's just that it wasn't something that you could actually do subtly. Tai scoffed.

"Just be glad he didn't get here a few hours ago, because I'm fairly certain he would've heard you screaming from the fucking lobby." Taissa shot Jackie an icy glare.

Jackie pursed her lips, stayed silent.

Fuck.

Shauna decided to take the time to put some actual clothes on. It was almost noon and going down to the lobby in pajamas wouldn't send the best message.

Jackie dressed herself quickly and slicked her hair back into a low ponytail. She looked beautiful, of course, even without her usual makeup. Shauna stared at her reflection in the huge mirror, as she tried to fix her hair. Dark circles under her eyes, cheeks now constantly swollen from crying so much, lips a little chapped and raw. Her hands shook. It'd been too long since she'd properly eaten. She dropped the pin she was trying to use to hold her hair back twice and swore, shutting her eyes against the tears of frustration welling in them.

If they knew that she was here, that meant that other people might. It wasn't just their presence that was freaking Shauna out, even though the thought of seeing Jeff and Callie right now was enough to turn her stomach. It was what this meant for their fucking safety.

Shauna opened her eyes to Jackie standing behind her. The pin Shauna had dropped was between her lips. She spun Shauna around to face her before rummaging through her makeup bag for another pin, popping that one in her mouth too. Shauna kept her eyes on Jackie's lips as she fixed her hair. They were downturned—not her usual. Shauna watched them part ever so slightly to grab the first pin, before pressing shut again so that she didn't lose the second.

When Jackie was done, she licked her thumb and rubbed at a bit of dried drool on the corner of Shauna's mouth.

Oh God.

Shauna twisted her face at the action, grimacing like she might've when they were young. Jackie smiled gently, her lips turning up—where they belonged.

"You're beautiful." Jackie sounded a little distracted, almost. She kissed Shauna's cheek gently. 'Always so beautiful.' Shauna scrunched her nose and gave a shallow sigh. Jackie's smile faltered some, but she didn't say anything more about it. "Do you want me to go to someone else's room while you talk to them?" she asked instead.

"Come with me," Shauna pleaded. Jackie immediately flashed her a concerned frown. Shauna took both of her hands in her own. "Just down to the lobby. Will you come? Please? I wanna try and convince them to get out of here. That it isn't safe. He might listen if it isn't just me."

Jackie sighed. Hers was deep—she used her whole chest. "I'll do whatever you want me to, but if you change your mind just tell me, okay?" Jackie squeezed her hands. "You aren't gonna, like, offend me if you need to be alone with him. Okay?"

Shauna nodded, her lip trembling. She felt like a fucking kid. Jackie pulled her in for a hug that only heightened that feeling—her cheeks squished between the side of Jackie's head and her upper arm. She was completely enveloped by her. She felt her shoulders drop and her jaw unclench. Jackie had always given comforting hugs.

Shauna had thought about them every fucking day when Callie was a little girl. She'd thought that if Jackie was there, she would've hugged Callie in a way that would slow her tears. Shauna had never been able to get it right. She'd always felt awkward and smothering when she'd tried. Jeff hadn't tried at all.

So, Shauna would watch Callie cry until she went red in the face.

She'd imagine finding Jackie's grave and crawling in next to her. Offering her own flesh and her own blood to Jackie's bones, so that Jackie could be whole again. Shauna could stay there in the ground and Jackie could rise out of it and she could be Callie's mom, because she would know how to hug her.

She'd felt the urge to dig Jackie up so many times out there. Stifled it. Satiated it by digging her hands in the dirt at camp instead, twisting deep and pretending that there was some of Jackie in the earth between her fingers. But now… now, Shauna wished that she had tried to dig her up, because she would've found nothing where something should've been. She would've searched high and low and found Jackie. Alive. Alone. Or, more likely, she would've threatened everyone within an inch of their lives, until those who had the answers fessed up.

Shauna would've crawled in that bunker with her—much better than a grave—and dropped to her knees. Begged. She wouldn't have left her. Wouldn't have given her the option to say no. Not out there. And Jackie would've forgiven her. Shauna knew that much. Jackie always granted Shauna forgiveness when she could look her in the eyes and beg.

She was begging now, wasn't she? Begging for Jackie to come with her while she talked to Jeff, of all people. She was so certain it was the last thing Jackie wanted to do—watch her have a marital spat with him. But Shauna had begged. And Jackie didn't say no to Shauna when she did that. (Maybe it wasn't even begging anymore, if you knew they'd say yes.)

Jackie had even made excuses for her behavior, implying that Shauna was worried that she would be bothered by them being alone together. Truthfully, Shauna hadn't even considered Jackie's reaction.

Bang, bang, bang.

They both jumped. Jackie released Shauna.

"Shauna?" A different voice, also frantic.

Jeff.

Jackie bit her lip and nodded toward the door, prompting Shauna to answer.

Fuck.

Shauna opened the door to Jeff—looking angrier than she'd seen him in a very long time, maybe ever—and Callie—a few feet behind him, fucking petrified.

"Mom," Callie gasped, pushing past her father.

Oh.

Callie threw herself at Shauna, locking her arms around her neck so that their chins rested on each other's shoulders. Callie gave comforting hugs, too. Shauna hadn't been the recipient of them often, but she'd seen her wrap her friends in her arms and hold them close. She'd wondered where Callie had learned how. Shauna squeezed her back. She felt a genuine rush of love for her daughter, now that she was in front of her.

Good.

Callie tried to pull away, but Shauna held on a few seconds longer before releasing her grip. Callie made her way into the room and threw herself down onto the loveseat with a sigh—always making herself at home, that girl.

"Am I interrupting something?" Jeff asked sharply, looking between Shauna and Jackie.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Shauna spat. "You have no idea how stupid it is for you to show up like this. How'd you even know where I was?"

"Hello to you too, babe." He sounded exhausted, bitterness adding bite to his words. "Nice to see you. Been days since I've talked to you."

"Come in." Shauna motioned him towards her and shut the door behind him. "How?" she repeated sternly.

Jeff ignored her, opting instead to stare at Jackie. "So, you just staying here for this, then? Are you two a package deal again?" Less exhausted, more bitter.

It was odd, the way he talked to her. When they were teenagers, Jackie had told Shauna that he got angry with her sometimes. That his voice took a sharp turn and his eyes went serious. Once she'd started fucking him behind her back, Shauna had assumed that Jackie was exaggerating or fishing for sympathy. Because he didn't take a tone with Shauna, even after years of marriage. He rarely got angry and, when he did, he definitely didn't sound angry. Not even when things were fucked beyond belief. But right now… he sounded pissed.

Jackie stood with her arms crossed against her chest and her lips in a tight frown. Her eyes were slightly narrowed, her chin held high. She said nothing.

"Jeff!" Shauna yelled, snapping her fingers in front of his face. She had no problem sounding pissed when she was. "Focus! I need to know how you found me. It's important."

Jeff was still staring at Jackie, challenging her.

Jesus Christ.

"Callie, honey?" Shauna took a much gentler tone, spinning to face her daughter. She'd sunk down into her seat, like she was trying to slip through the floor and vanish. That was something she'd gotten from Shauna. "Please. It's okay, just tell me."

"I—Mom, sometimes you just like… totally vanish. When you do that thing you do. When you go away. So…" Callie gave an exasperated huff before continuing. "So, Dad had me go on your phone and change your settings so you were sharing your location with me, like, forever ago. Just in case."

"What the fuck?" Shauna yelped, swinging around to Jeff. She got in his face, blocking his view of Jackie. She couldn't fucking handle his attention wavering. "Seriously, what—" she shoved his shoulders, "the—" shove, "fuck—" shove. She'd backed him up a few steps. He glared back at her.

"Um," Jackie's gentle voice broke the silence, "what if I take Callie downstairs for some breakfast? Would you like that, honey?"

Jackie was at Callie's side, a hand resting on her shoulder. Callie looked pale. Shocked. Shauna and Jeff bickered plenty, but they didn't fight like this. They didn't have a reason to—fights like this required passion to fuel them. Shauna didn't want Jackie to leave. But she wanted Callie out of the room more.

"Yes—" Shauna and Callie said, in unison.

"No!" Jeff barked, at the same time.

Jackie swallowed, looking to Shauna for guidance.

"You're not taking my kid somewhere, Jackie." Jeff's voice was calmer, but his face was still set in anger. "How the hell do I know I can trust you? No. She's staying where I can see her. If there's any truth to what Shauna's been saying, this is a real dangerous situation."

"It is!" Shauna said sharply. "And you thought oh, my wife is in danger, let me bring my kid straight into it! What the fuck is wrong with you? Cal, go with Jackie."

"Callie, stay right where you are," Jeff demanded, one hand on his hip, a finger pointing in her direction. His eyes were still locked on Shauna.

"Oh my God. Since when do you try to parent her, Jeff? For fuck's sake!" Shauna was over this big fucking charade of his. She wanted them out so that she could begin whatever damage control her phone being tracked necessitated. Misty was going to be beyond pissed.

"Shauna," Jackie said softly. She'd appeared at her side, grazing her elbow with delicate fingers to capture her attention. "I could ask Tai to take her. Or to come be in here with you."

She glanced at Jeff wearily.

“Oh, come on. You think she’s not safe with me?” Jeff was back to staring at Jackie like he could burn holes into her skin with his gaze. Something protective blazed in Shauna. Possessive, maybe. The same feeling she’d had when they were teenagers and Jeff had tried to force Jackie into a closet with him when she clearly had no interest in going. She placed a hand on the front of Jackie’s hip, blocking her from him. “She’s been with me for decades that you conveniently missed out on. I would never hurt her.”

“I didn’t say you would,” Jackie scoffed, shaking her head. Her arms were planted firmly across her chest, completely closed off.

“No, but you sure implied it. You of all people have no right—no reason not to trust me. You’ve lied to her more than anyone, at this point. Meanwhile, I kept her alive. You’re welcome for that, I guess.”

Jeff apparently didn’t give a fuck that their daughter was in the room. Shauna opened her mouth to speak, but Jackie was finally angry enough to engage with him.

“You blackmailed your wife!” Jackie yelled. “Who does that? Sure as hell not someone I would trust!”

Jackie was going to lose her voice again. She took half a step forward, Shauna’s hand slipping off of her hip and falling to her own side.

“Mom, what?” Callie went wide-eyed, sitting up straight. Shauna sighed and took a seat next to her, placing a hand on Callie’s knee and shaking her head.

“You faked your death!” Jeff shot back.

“You showed up ready for a fucking fight,” Jackie waved a dismissive hand up and down toward his body, “when she’s going through actual hell!”

“You—” Jeff was out of control, his cheeks pink and his chest heaving. He shook his head like he was trying to clear it, pulled a twisted face like he hadn’t been successful, started again. “You lied to me the whole fucking time! It was all bullshit!”

Oh.

This wasn’t about Shauna anymore.

“Oh, you’re one to talk, asshole.” Jackie pressed her thumbnail into the side of her pointer finger over and over. “You fucked my best friend while we were together!”

“Mom, what the fuck?” Callie asked quietly, disgust evident in her tone.

“You fucked her first!” Jeff screamed.

“Mom, what the *fuck?”* Callie repeated, her brows raised. This time, beneath the shock, she sounded almost impressed. Shauna shrugged at her. Her jaw dropped.

“She’s not even a fucking person anymore, Jackie! You ruined her life and I had to deal with the aftermath. She was this… genius, creative person and she doesn’t do anything now. There’s nothing left of her.”

And it's about me again.

"Dad," Callie said firmly. "That's… that's harsh." Shauna squeezed her knee, shaking her head again. Jeff didn't even look at them.

"Don't talk about her like that!" Jackie yelled—quieter than him, still louder than they ought to be. "Jesus Christ, what's wrong with you?"

There was nothing subtle about the way they'd behaved since they'd barreled into this damn hotel.

Jeff was practically panting in frustration. Both of his hands were on his hips and he bent forward a bit at the waist, as if bracing himself. "Shauna," his voice had an eerie calmness to it, "do you wanna take Callie downstairs? Get her breakfast?"

"What?" Shauna and Callie both snapped.

"Sorry," Shauna continued, "did you trace my phone and barrel headfirst into danger with our daughter in tow because you wanted to be alone with Jackie?"

"Jeff, I have zero interest in being stuck in a fucking room with you." Jackie looked stunned that he'd even suggested it.

"I'm not a kid. What's with the babysitter thing?" Callie mumbled, scooting forward. "If you guys really wanna have this fight or whatever without me here, I can go downstairs by myself and—"

"No!" This time all three of them spoke at once.

Callie rolled her eyes and slumped back in her seat.

There was a sliding noise from outside the door, like something was moving against it. Shauna frowned and walked past Jackie and Jeff, who were still locked in some sort of deranged standoff, to wrench it open. Tai and Nat quite literally fell forward, stumbling into the room.

"Why am I not surprised?" Jackie rolled her eyes, grabbing Nat's arm to help her to her feet.

"You weren't exactly keeping it a secret with all the fucking screaming." Nat shrugged. "The wall between our rooms just has bad acoustics." She didn't look embarrassed, but Tai certainly did.

Jeff stared at them silently. His body was holding too much tension, a spring waiting to release. He really wanted to have this fucking fight.

"Actually, I'm glad you two are such nosey bitches." Shauna grabbed her purse, fishing out her wallet. 'Callie, you've met Tai.' Callie nodded and Tai raised her hand in a weak wave. "This is Natalie." Shauna gestured at her. "Natalie, this is my daughter, Callie. Tai, Nat, can you please take her downstairs for something to eat? Consider it your tax for the entertainment?"

"Yeah, no problem," Tai said briskly, forcing a small smile. Nat nodded noncommittally.

“Great,” Shauna breathed. ‘Here, Cal.’ She handed Callie her wallet as she stood. “Everything’s okay. Just give us a little bit of time, yeah?” Callie nodded, looking dazed.

Shauna felt the sudden urge to hug her again. She wrapped her in her arms before she could think too hard about it, rubbing her back like she was trying to warm her up. Callie stood statue still for a few seconds, then squeezed her back. This was new to both of them—they’d been distant, had a strained relationship for years now. (Maybe always, if Shauna was being honest with herself, but she really tried to avoid being quite that honest. Especially with herself.)

As they filed out, Nat looked over her shoulder, purposefully locking eyes with Jackie and Shauna in turn. “If you need us… for anything, just give me a call.” She raised her phone and looked Jeff up and down, making no attempt to hide her disgust. Jackie nodded and Natalie shut the door quietly behind them.

Shauna held her breath, waiting for Jeff to comment on her decision to send Callie with them. He didn’t. He wasn’t fucking worried about Callie going off with someone he couldn’t trust. He just hadn’t wanted to let Jackie out of his sight. He stood there, fuming and immobile, like he’d hit pause and was antsy to pick up where he’d left off.

“Are you fucking my wife?” he asked, his eyes trained on Jackie. She looked in control—neutral expression, relaxed jaw. His voice was calmer now, too. Much closer to the tone Shauna was used to in their arguments.

Shauna, on the other hand, went red. She clutched at her elbows, letting her arms hang in front of her. She wanted to scream at him, to tell him to fuck off. But what could she say, really?

“We’re not doing this.” Jackie was all steely restraint. She was giving him nothing of herself. “Fuck you.”

“No really,” Jeff pushed forward. “Because you broke her heart. Honestly, you broke everything about her. How could you let her think that you were dead this whole time?”

Shauna was dizzy again. Hot. Too hot. She needed fresh air. Her mouth felt sticky shut, words dying in her throat. They weren’t looking at her, though. They didn’t expect her to speak. It was about her, but it wasn’t.

“I—you wouldn’t understand.” Jackie’s voice was straining. “It’s so complicated. You have no idea what it was like. No idea what I—”

“I wasn’t there, no. But I have some idea. I’ve read those journals. I’ve been with her for twice the time you even knew her. So I have some fucking idea.” Jeff’s jaw was working, clenching between words. “And you left her like that. Jackie, she didn’t do anything with her life. She just mourned you. She stayed home and just… just fucking existed.” His tone shifted into genuine sadness and that was so much fucking worse.

“Stop! Just stop talking about her like that.” Jackie’s voice cracked every few words. Her thumb nail left halfmoon imprints on the sides of all of her fingers. She was shuffling through them, like she was looking for the right fit.

It wasn’t just the screaming that made Jackie lose her voice. Shauna had known that even when they were kids. Strong emotion sucked the strength right out of her words—left her

with a raw, scratchy throat. Every time she was vulnerable, she reached some unspoken upper limit and her body cut her off, just like that—no more of this.

"You weren't there. You don't know what it was like. I'm not saying this shit to be cruel." Jeff ran a shaky hand through his hair. 'I'm… I'm saying it to make you understand. I know you two are— "he choked, almost sounded close to tears." I can see what's happening here. For Christ's sake, you're in a hotel room together. You both have… fucking hickeys like… like we're all seventeen again.' It was almost a joke. Shauna watched his throat bob as he swallowed. He rubbed a hand across his forehead. Jackie chewed her lip. "My point is, if you're gonna disappear again, please just… do it now. Don't let her get comfortable, cause I don't think I can put her back together again. I always knew I was second best. Shit, maybe not even second. But I love her and I can't watch her go through that again."

"I'm—" Jackie's eyes were wide, so impossibly wide. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm here."

Jeff said something back, but Shauna didn't hear it. She was so so tired. She just wanted to go back to sleep. To shove Jeff out the door and take Jackie by the hand and drag her into bed and hold her so close it was a little uncomfortable and fucking sleep. She backed up against the wall and slid down it until she hit the floor, her legs crossed and her head in her hands. Jackie and Jeff were still arguing. Shauna thought they were, at least. She was somewhere else—in the backseat of Jeff's childhood car, listening to them have a very different argument.

"I'm just saying," Jeff grumbled, "your mom isn't gonna be happy if you two wake her up and Shauna's wasted. She's not gonna be quiet."

"Fuck you, talking about her like you know her better than I do," Jackie snapped. "You're dropping us both off at mine. I don't even know why you give a shit."

"Because…" Jeff paused, a beat too long. Thinking. "Because I don't want you grounded for my game next weekend."

Because he wants to fuck me after we drop you off, Jackie. I don't know how you don't get that yet.

Shauna wanted to scream it at them. She didn't, though. Of course she didn't. She rolled her window down and stuck her hand out. The cold air made her fingers go numb.

"I think I can handle my own parents. Besides, who the fuck cares if I miss one game. You never come to my games."

Jeff ignored her comment about their games. Didn't even acknowledge it.

Asshole, Shauna thought.

"You missed the last one because you just had to hang out with Shauna instead." Her name was bitter on his tongue.

Asshole, Shauna thought again.

"And the boys are starting to… to think it's weird, Jackie. Like, you only ever wanna be with her. It's weird."

“The boys,” Jackie said in a lilting voice, mocking him, “can mind their fucking business. What the hell do they know? You’re taking us to my house, stop being an idiot. I’ll be at your stupid fucking game.”

Jeff groaned, but what else could he say? Short of: babe, I wanna fuck your best friend in the front seat of my car two minutes after we drop you off and you’re sort of cock-blocking me right now.

Maybe Shauna should’ve felt wanted. Maybe being argued over should’ve made her feel happy. Powerful.

Except no one had asked Shauna where she wanted to go.

She sort of wanted to go home. Her head was aching. She’d had way too much to drink, watched a little too closely as Jackie had giggled at Jeff’s dumb jokes and grabbed his bicep and at some point his hand had slipped down to her ass and the rest was a blur because Shauna had chased away the hate with liquor.

But either way, she wasn’t getting what she wanted. Stay in the car after they dropped Jackie off, and she’d end up fucking Jeff—getting him off quickly so that she could just go the fuck home and sleep. He wouldn’t force her, wouldn’t really guilt her even. But she’d do it anyway. Then she’d get in bed and cry because she’d feel guilty and she’d have thought of Jackie the entire time and her whole body would ache for her.

Get out with Jackie, though, and she wasn’t going straight to bed either. They’d been interrupted in the bathroom earlier, when Jackie was so close to finishing—her manicured nails digging into Shauna’s shoulders. She’d whimpered so pitifully when they’d had to break apart that Shauna had thought that she might actually cry. Maybe that’s why Jackie wanted her to stay over so badly. Maybe she just wanted to use her, too.

No, Shauna knew that wasn’t fair. She could easily tell Jackie that she didn’t feel good and Jackie would bring her water and hold her and scratch her back just the way she liked until she fell asleep. But Shauna wouldn’t tell her that she didn’t feel well. She’d get as close to her as Jackie would allow and then she’d burn with the want for more and she’d fucking hate Jackie for it, just a little bit.

They’d arrived at Jackie’s house. Shauna didn’t notice until Jackie was opening her door for her, flashing her a cautious smile. Her eyes were narrowed. Confused. She had Shauna’s jacket pulled tight around body, because when she’d shivered at the party Jeff hadn’t noticed. But Shauna had.

“Hey, pretty lady. You’re quiet.” Jackie reached across Shauna’s lap to undo her seatbelt for her when she made no effort to do it herself. Jackie was so beautiful, just then. Lit up by the glow of the streetlights, grinning as Shauna reached for her hand. “Drunker than I thought, maybe?”

Shauna gave Jackie a dopey smile and let her guide her out of the car. Jackie didn’t say bye to Jeff. Maybe she had before Shauna had snapped out of her thoughts. When Jeff said bye, Shauna she just waved a dismissive hand over her shoulder. Jackie slammed the car door. And they walked up the driveway with their arms wrapped around each other.

While Shauna had been elsewhere, the argument had ramped up. Their voices were louder. Shauna forced herself to tune in.

“Jeff,” Jackie’s voice was halfway to gone, “I am such a lesbian. Every time you touched me I wanted to die a little.”

“And you knew? Even then, you knew that and you just kept—”

“Frankly, I’m not sure how you didn’t know, but that’s exactly why I kept you around.”

“You used me.” Jeff shook his head, genuinely affronted.

Jackie laughed caustically. “And you used me. In a lot of fucking ways, you used me. You didn’t pay a damn scrap of attention to what I did and didn’t want. You had no problem shoving your dick down my throat when I know I looked like I would rather be six feet under.” Jackie’s hands trembled. She balled them into fists at her sides. Shauna imagined herself moving—crossing the room to take Jackie into her arms—but she couldn’t even peel herself off of the ground.

“Yeah, Jackie. I was an idiot teenage boy. I thought that was normal, I don’t know. And anyway, I wanted Shauna. Not you. You just had your claws so deep in her, there was no way for me—”

Shauna was back. Jeff had kicked her into gear. She cackled at him from her spot on the floor, tears pricking her eyes. Both Jeff and Jackie turned to look at her, as if they’d just registered her presence.

“Oh, you only wanted me? Bullshit.” Shauna pulled herself to feet. ‘You wanted both of us. The whole fucking time. And when she died,’ she took a few wobbly steps toward him, “you tried to make me be both of us.”

“Shauna, no I—”

Shauna raised a hand to silence him, ignored the heat of Jackie’s gaze—inspecting her. “Don’t fucking pretend like you weren’t a little obsessed with her, too. You wanted me to be like her. That fucking dress you bought me for the reunion? That was a Jackie dress. I would never wear that. And what was it you said? You married into homecoming royalty? I mean, what the fuck is that about, if not her?”

“You—you—” All of Jackie’s features rounded with horror. “That’s—”

Shauna would do damage control later. Jackie already knew how insane she was about her. She’d forgiven ultimate betrayals, overlooked murder, shrugged off hallucinations—Shauna could smooth this over. But Jeff needed to have that smug look knocked off of his stupid fucking face and Shauna was spiraling out of control. She couldn’t have stopped the words from flowing if she wanted to. “I had to stand up there and dance with you in her place! As her—her fucking proxy,” Shauna cried. “Do you know how sick that is? And I did it anyway, because I know that’s part of it for you. That’s who I have to be for you. Both of us, all the time!”

“Oh my God,” Jackie breathed out shakily. She rubbed her temple with two careful fingers. “What the hell, you guys? I don’t understand what you—why you—”

“That’s not—it isn’t like that. By the end of it, I only wanted you, Shauna. You know that.” Jeff tried to reach for her. She smacked his hand away. “I’ve told you that. I wanted to break up with her for good and try to win you over, but you were going to nationals and I knew you wouldn’t forgive me if I fucked that up.”

“Oh, bull-fucking-shit, Sadecki,” Jackie laughed. Anger twisted her face, a spark behind her eyes where hollow shock had been moments ago. “News flash, I’m not dead and I’m standing right in front of you. So the lies aren’t just gonna go unchecked. You were nowhere near breaking up with me. Right before we left, you were begging me to tell you I loved you. Like, fucking unrelenting. And if you were still doing that shit then, I don’t think you’d been trying to figure out how to dump me during the months that you two were fucking around.”

“Months?” Jeff scoffed. He shot Shauna a look, his eyes cruel with excitement.

No. No no no no no.

Jeff’s lips curled into a small smile. “Try years.”

Jackie stepped back. More like stumbled, shuffling her feet as if she’d been physically shoved. She tilted her head to the side. The edge of her scar peeked out as her sweater shifted with the motion—jagged red beneath violet cashmere. She pursed her lips and turned to face Shauna. Her arms shook rapidly at her sides—buzzing, almost. “Who started it?” she whispered.

Shauna wrapped her arms around her stomach, shaking her head violently from side to side. She couldn’t feel anything, but she knew that she was crying. It was the beginning of being gone. She still had awareness, but soon she’d be separated from the sensations of her body, suspended solely in the far fucking worse pain of her mind. Nothing could numb it once that happened. Not booze or pills or sex with the wrong person (everyone was the wrong person, except the woman whose heart she was breaking all over again). No distractions.

“Shauna?” Her name choked Jackie on its way out.

“I did,” Jeff interjected. “The first time… it was me. But you and I were broken up. The guys told me you were too… obsessed with her. And you never wanted to let me touch you. So… Randy thought I should see if Shauna was, y’know, down for it. And then I’d know if you two were… together together.”

It was about Jackie. The whole time it was about Jackie.

“It was never me,” Shauna whispered, staring resolutely at the floor. “You—it was about her.”

Dizzy. Her head spun and her stomach swooped down, down, down until she was hollowed out, her body an empty vessel, waiting to be filled with that familiar clawing pain.

“Shauna, I wasn’t asking him.” Jackie waited for a response, realized she wasn’t getting one. ‘Please, ba—Shauna,’ she corrected herself. “I don’t give a fuck about him.” Jackie gulped, swallowing down a sob. “I’m talking to you. Please, just—just look at me.”

Shauna didn’t look up. Her mind was on fire and she was seconds from being sucked into the black hole of it completely. She couldn’t handle this. It was too much. Jackie took a step

towards her. She took a step back reflexively. Jackie sobbed and the sound ripped through the room, snapping Shauna back into herself as she felt it tear through her body.

“God, fuck this,” Jeff muttered. ‘This is just great, Shauna. Fine, I’ll tell her. Jackie,’ he moved towards her, filling the space Shauna had left empty, “I did start it. The very first time. For a stupid goddamn reason.”

“Incredibly fucking stupid.” Jackie was definitely losing her voice. Shauna wanted to soothe her. Pull her into her arms, cover her ears against this shit Jeff was spewing, wrap her in the fancy duvet, make her cup after cup of tea to ease the pain in her throat. But Shauna couldn’t even pick one fucking foot up and place it in front of the other. “Because, what? If Shauna fucked you, it meant that I wasn’t gay? Make that make sense.”

“It doesn’t make sense! We were fifteen, of course it doesn’t make sense.”

“Fuck,” Jackie sobbed. She inhaled—a sharp, gasping plea for oxygen. “Fifteen? That—that long?”

Shauna kept her head down.

“It took me a while to figure it out, but she only ever wanted to fuck me when you and I were together, Jackie. Mostly when our relationship was going good. She wouldn’t even talk to me if we were broken up.” Jeff pushed forward with his monologue, ignoring both of the women’s reactions. They were his stage-audience—spotlights blinding his eyes, obscuring the unimportant faces in the crowd. All that mattered to him was that they were there and they had to listen to him. Shauna’s tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth. ‘The better things were with us, the more she came onto me.’ Jackie took an audible, shuddering breath. “It was both of you or nothing and I wanted one of the girls I was in love with to give a fuck about me. So… there it is.”

“That’s so… that’s so fucking mean,” Jackie whimpered.

Shauna finally pried her gaze off of her feet. Jackie’s eyes were swollen. Her lower lip was bleeding, a thin red line marring the soft pink of it.

“I wanted—” Shauna sobbed, stalled out. Took a breath and tried again. “I think I just—just wanted to—to know what he had that I didn’t. I didn’t know what I was doing. Please, Jackie, I—I—”

“You knew exactly what you were doing,” Jeff said coolly. This was the tone he took with Shauna in anger. She knew this one well. He was about to truly fuck her over. “You’ve got all these people who’re devoted to you. Willing to give up everything for you. And you still think you’re a victim. I saw it even then. Jackie would bend over backwards to try and make you happy.”

“I—I didn’t—”

“Was she bossy sometimes?” Jeff raised his voice. “Yeah, that’s who she fucking is. But she was never running that ship. It was you. Every time you got sad or pissed off, she was desperate to fix it. I’ve read those journals. I know what you said to her. And I know what she did after it.”

“Don’t speak for me,” Jackie said through gritted teeth.

“Tell me I’m wrong,” Jeff challenged. He paused to give Jackie a chance to argue. She stayed silent. “You had the power in that relationship, Shauna. You. It’s the same fucking thing with us. We were on when you wanted, off when you wanted. You’ve always been in control. Of all of it. I spend half my life trying not to set you off.”

Shauna muffled a cry with her palm. “That’s n-not—”

“And Adam, Shauna? The way Callie tells it, he was probably in love with you, too. And you killed him. Killed him!” Jeff whisper-yelled. “And those are just the times I know of. God knows how many people you’ve pulled this shit with, because I know there’s no way in hell that was the first time you cheated.”

“It’s not—I—I was—he had all that stuff and I thought—”

“And even knowing all the fucked up shit you’ve done, I can guarantee you that both of us,” he waved a hand between himself and Jackie, “would still take a goddamn bullet for you. I used to think you just didn’t know how to love people. But I’ve gotta tell you, I’m starting to think that you know exactly what you’re doing.”

Shauna sobbed, burying her face in her hands. She bent forward at the waist, folding her body nearly in half. Jackie gave quiet cries, but didn’t offer a challenge to Jeff’s words or a defense for Shauna’s actions.

“Did she tell you that she was leaving me for you?” Jeff asked sharply. Shauna snapped up to glare at him through her tears, willing him to shut the fuck up.

“I don’t…” Jackie mumbled.

“Did she?” he repeated.

“I—I—”

“Of course she did. Well, guess what, Jackie? She’s playing both of us.” Jeff flashed her a pained smile. “What the fuck is new? She told me that she needed to get you out of her system. The one time I got her to actually call me, that’s what she told me when I asked.”

“You fucking asshole!” Shauna shrieked. “That’s twisting my fucking words and you know it!”

“I’ve gotta go,” Jackie said suddenly. She looked like she’d been hit over the head—mouth slack, eyes wide with shock. She grabbed her purse and threw it over her shoulder.

“Jackie, no! Please!” Shauna sobbed, reaching for her arm. “That’s not what—”

Jackie yanked out of Shauna’s reach, heading towards the door. “Those words shouldn’t have been there to twist in the first place,” Jackie sobbed. “And the fact that you don’t get that is the fucking problem.” She grasped the doorknob.

Shauna leapt at her before she could twist it, spinning her around by the shoulders. “Don’t go.” Shauna gripped her upper arms tight. ‘Please. Please, don’t leave me.’ Jackie tried to wriggle out of her hold. “No, please!” Shauna clutched Jackie’s cheeks frantically.

Jackie ducked out of her reach and swung the door open. Tai, Nat, and Callie were on the other side, just closing the distance to the room. Their faces all slipped into immediate

concern. Jackie started down the hall without acknowledging them. She made it two steps before Shauna snagged her wrist, forcing her back.

“It isn’t safe! Please! Don’t walk away. Don’t walk into danger because I fucked up.” Shauna’s voice had never sounded this desperate. It was Jackie’s body—cold and still—being ripped from her hands. It was unbelievable hope, a miraculous gift, a promise of something impossible, the best thing that had ever happened to her, being torn away. And, unlike before, she could fix it. “Please! I can explain! I—I didn’t say it like that.”

“Shauna!” Jackie screamed as hard as she could with her strained voice. Shauna dropped her wrist. She took a few ragged breaths, her eyes locked on Shauna’s, then closed the distance between them. She took Shauna’s jaw in one hand. “I need you to let me get the fuck out of here for a while. I’m angry and I need a minute. I’m not leaving you. I’m not doing anything dangerous. I’m gonna come back. I promise you. I just need you to let me go.”

“I’ll go with her,” Nat said quickly. “I got her, dude.” She gave Shauna a small nod and placed a hand at the small of Jackie’s back. They started down the hall, Jackie pressing one hand to her chest and the other to the side of her face, as if she was trying to physically hold herself together.

“Please—” Shauna tried to follow.

“Shauna.” Tai blocked her path, gripping her waist to keep her bound in place. “Let her go.”

10. shauna motherfucking shipman

1992/93

"Will you come with me?" Jackie whined in Shauna's ear, pulling on the sleeve of her jacket gently.

She'd been clinging to Shauna all night. Earlier that week, she'd broken up with Jeff for the second time since they'd started dating. Shauna had no fucking clue what Jackie even saw in him. Besides, she never seemed to care about him that much until they were broken up. But the moment that they were off again instead of on again—bam, it was the end of the world.

They'd been taking shots of the Matthews' fancy liquor since eight o'clock with most of the other underclassmen from Wiskayok. It was nearly midnight and the party was ramping up, everyone antsy for the countdown to the new year. They'd only gotten drunk twice before. Both times it'd been just the two of them, testing the waters at Jackie's house while her parents were out of town so that they wouldn't completely embarrass themselves in front of their classmates.

Jackie gave Shauna her best puppy dog look. Shauna giggled because there was no need for it. Of course she was going to go with her. "Yes, drunky," she grinned. She pulled her sleeve out of Jackie's hand, lacing their fingers together instead. "Let's go. But if you puke on me, I'm gonna be so mad."

Jackie squealed in delight and squeezed Shauna's hand. "I'm not even that drunk. I just wanna fix my makeup."

They pushed through the crowd—drunk, sweaty, loud—until they reached the stairs. Jackie dropped Shauna's hand as she slipped around the large potted plant that Lottie had placed at the base of them to keep people from going up. A flash of panic coursed through Shauna at the loss, but the second she'd cleared the obstacle, Jackie wiggled her fingers expectantly.

When they slipped into one of the many guest bathrooms, Shauna automatically leaned against the far wall, watching as Jackie pulled a compact and a tube of lip gloss out of her pocket. She squinted at herself, pressing the powder onto her nose and cheeks. Shauna couldn't see any difference, but Jackie seemed satisfied. She moved on to applying a layer of gloss on her lips.

Jackie sighed, her lips suddenly downturned.

Uh oh.

"You look pretty, Jax." Shauna moved to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with her, making eye contact in the mirror.

She did. Beyond pretty. Everything about her was pretty all the time. Her hair shined golden-brown—Shauna wanted to fan it out across her fingers like honey dripping down the side of her hand. Her nose was dotted with spots that you could only see if you were looking

for them, a puzzle that Shauna had the answer-key to, because she'd spent plenty of time mapping those plains. Her lips were pink all on their own and full enough to look heavy, like they'd have weight if Shauna pulled them between her own and they were—

Moving. Jackie's lips were moving.

"Pretty girls don't not get kissed at midnight."

The warmth Shauna had been feeling for Jackie frosted over. Her eyes stung with the beginning of tears. Drunk. She was too drunk. "Oh, really? Cause you know I won't, so what does that mean for me?"

Jackie turned to face Shauna, tugging her arm until she did the same. Jackie's brow was creased and her lower lip jutted out a little—her concerned face. "Well, that's not the same. Everyone knows you're the prettiest girl in the room. You're, like, above it. If you don't kiss someone at midnight, it just means you're being choosy. That's different." Jackie's eyes darted around Shauna's face as she spoke, so quick it made Shauna dizzy trying to track them.

She was fishing for compliments. Shauna scrunched her nose and rolled her eyes. Jackie grabbed her shoulders. Her thumbs brushed back and forth, dragging the scratchy fabric of Shauna's shimmery black top against her skin.

"I guarantee you, no one thinks I'm the prettiest girl in the room," Shauna sighed.

"I do," Jackie said earnestly.

"Well, you're my best friend. You sort of have to think that."

Jackie's perfume smelled sweet. They were standing close enough that Shauna could've followed the scent to the exact spot she'd dabbed it on, the soft patches of skin just beneath her ears. Jackie's arms slipped around her neck. Shauna's heart started to race, thud thud thudding against her ribs. She'd probably drunk too much. She glanced at Jackie's mouth. Her gloss was somehow a little messy already, smeared just above the bow of her top lip.

"Mmm, nuh-uh. I totally don't. Even if we weren't friends at all, I would think you're the prettiest girl in the room." Jackie traced a finger down Shauna's nose. Her eyes were soft, completely focused on Shauna, as if she'd forgotten the entire reason that she was upset in the first place. "You always are."

"Yeah, sure," Shauna whispered, unsure why she couldn't bring herself to speak any louder. She settled her arms around Jackie's waist.

"I mean it," Jackie said firmly, swatting at her shoulder for emphasis.

God, maybe she did.

"Well…" Shauna swallowed hard, "I know I'm not when you're in the room. And we're, like, always together, so…" She blushed and chewed on her lip. Fuck. She'd definitely drunk too much.

Jackie grinned in that way that she did—the one that lit her whole face up. So pretty. "You're so stupid," she giggled.

“Oh, I’m stupid now?” Shauna blushed, fighting to keep her voice even. “Jeez, I can’t catch a break.”

Jackie tucked her hair behind her ear. Shauna’s heart was absolutely hammering. She didn’t even care about New Year’s, but she felt sick with excitement suddenly.

Jackie flipped her wrist towards herself, glancing at her watch. “Shit,” she mumbled. ‘It’s almost midnight.’ Her eyes flicked to Shauna’s lips for just a second. Maybe less than a second, but it was long enough to make Shauna feel lightheaded. Jackie sighed and shook her head. “We should go back.”

“Wait—” Shauna said quickly. “Let’s… let’s just… stay.” She tugged Jackie an inch or two closer.

Jackie gave her a small smile—less dazzling, more cautious. Sweet. “In here? For midnight?” she asked softly.

“Yeah. Why not?” Shauna shrugged. “Until last year it was always just us.”

“Okay.” Jackie smiled bigger. ‘Yeah, just us.’ She flipped her watch back up and started counting down. Shauna watched her lips as they moved. “Five—four—three—two—”

She’s so so pretty.

Without thinking, without considering the ramifications, without asking herself why she was doing it, Shauna closed the small distance between them and pressed her lips to Jackie’s.

Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh—oh.

She’s kissing me back. Okay, she’s kissing me back.

They’d been each other’s first kisses. They’d practiced kissing in middle school, but they’d always said that it didn’t count. Those had been chaste kisses—sometimes long, but always gentle and innocent, never opening their mouths to each other.

This was not that. This was fueled by alcohol and what felt like sudden, quiet desperation.

Shauna gripped Jackie’s waist with one hand and brought the other up to cup her jaw, the way she thought a guy would do it—one who was actually good at this, not Jeff. She thought that Jackie would probably want to be the girl in this situation, and all Shauna wanted was Jackie, in whatever way she could have her. She tentatively ran her tongue across Jackie’s lips. Jackie parted them immediately.

Holyshitholyshitholyshit.

Jackie fisted a hand through Shauna’s hair and used her grip to guide her head to a slightly different angle, allowing them the press even closer.

She’s such a good kisser. Fuck Jeff for getting to kiss her whenever he wants and not appreciating it. Fuck him. Fuck him. Fuck him.

They stayed intertwined until Shauna begrudgingly pulled away to gulp in some breaths. Between the alcohol and the way Jackie had been touching her, she had no concept of time. It could’ve been thirty seconds, it could’ve been hours. All Shauna knew was that it wasn’t long enough.

Jackie's eyes were wide. She was struggling to catch her breath, even more than Shauna was. She brushed a thumb across the skin around Shauna's mouth to wipe away the gloss that'd settled there, but she left the pink where it sat on Shauna's lips. There was something about that that Shauna knew she wanted to remember—something special in it, but she couldn't put it into words.

Fuck.

"There," Shauna said, a little shaky, 'now you can tell him you did get kissed at midnight. You don't have to say who it was.' Jackie didn't say anything, she just kept staring at Shauna with impossibly wide eyes. Shauna opened her mouth quickly, panic rising in her chest. "He doesn't need to know that it was a girl and doesn't, like, count or whatever."

Jackie's eyes went glassy in an instant.

Oh God, what the fuck? What did I do?

"You're the best friend ever." A tear trailed down Jackie's face, carrying black from her mascara all the way to her jaw. Shauna wiped it away, chewing on the inside of her cheek nervously. Jackie pulled away and Shauna felt like she might actually vomit with fear, but Jackie quickly grabbed her hand, intertwining their fingers again, and gave her a small smile. "Come on, Shipman. Let's get back. It's almost 12:15."

Jackie started tugging her towards the door, but Shauna kept her feet planted where they were. When Jackie couldn't move any further, she turned back around. She was clearly trying not to cry and Shauna had no clue what she'd done. Jackie had seemed to really enjoy that and they were drunk and girls kissed their friends all the time when they were drunk and why would Jackie kiss her back like that if she hadn't wanted to?

Shauna stepped forward and wrapped her in her arms before she could think too hard about it. Jackie sank into her, meeting her embrace and nuzzling into her shoulder—such a sweet little motion it made Shauna's heart flutter. She didn't seem to be worried about messing up her makeup, which was so very unlike her. Shauna held her quietly for a minute, felt the tension start to ease out of both of their bodies. She desperately wanted to undo the damage that she'd apparently done, but she just as desperately wanted to kiss her again. Fuck, did she want to kiss her again.

She settled for squeezing her closer. "Happy New Year's, Jax," she whispered against the crown of her head.

Jackie lifted her face towards Shauna's. She looked exhausted. "Happy New Year's, Shauna."

Spring 1995

Van and Tai had gotten so good at this whole sneaking around thing. They were finally comfortable with each other. They'd learned how to make each other laugh and cry and… well, other things.

Tai had just left. They'd been the last ones in the locker room, strategically of course, so that they could have some privacy in a space larger than the backseat of a car. Van finished

packing her things up quickly. She held her half-open backpack by the handle, shuffling through for her keys as she turned the corner for the door and—

Fuck.

Maybe she and Taissa had gotten too fucking comfortable.

Maybe they didn't have it all figured out.

Because Shauna motherfucking Shipman was standing in front of Van, looking apologetic. She bit her lip, her deep brown eyes a little wider than usual. Van jumped and dropped her things.

Shit, shit, shit.

"Fuck," Van yelped, bending to shove the mess back into her bag. And of course Shauna did the same, so they smacked heads on the way down. 'God.' Van stood and rubbed a hand over her forehead. "Where'd you even come from?"

"I was in the stall." Shauna tapped her own skull lightly, assessing for damage. "I got my period and I didn't have a tampon and I was just trying to, like… wad up enough toilet paper that I didn't stain my shorts on the way home." She shrugged.

"So…" Van swallowed. "You, uh… you were there that whole time, then?"

"Yeah," Shauna said softly.

"Fuck." Van covered her face with both hands. Stupid. They'd been fucking reckless and they were so beyond fucked.

"I'm sorry, Van. Really. I didn't know what would be worse, so I was just gonna stay quiet and wait until you left and pretend I never heard anything, but then… I thought you left with Tai and you clearly…" Shauna waved a hand at her, "didn't."

Shauna had the fucking audacity to look anxious, as if this was all happening to her. As if the entire school was about to find out that she was a dyke.

"Please," Van choked out, "can you… can you just not tell anyone? You don't have to like us. You can hate us even. But just… can you not tell everybody? Please."

"Hate you?" Shauna cocked her head to the side. 'I—Van, I'm not like that. I don't hate you, what the fuck, dude? It's okay. I really don't care. I mean, I would've rather not heard you guys,' she smiled, "but that's because you're my friends and I don't need to hear you macking on anyone. Definitely not cause you're… both girls. I'm not telling anyone anything."

Van let out a shocked laugh, relief washing over her briefly, until she remembered that there was another issue. There was someone Shauna didn't keep anything from.

Jackie.

Van and Jackie were actual friends, as far as her teammates went. But Van didn't make a habit of asking her friends what they thought about dykes, because of course she didn't, so she had no way of knowing if Jackie was as hippie-dippy, free love about the whole lesbian situation as Shauna appeared to be .

“Shauna, you can’t tell Jackie. Please. She could—if she wanted to, she could ruin our fucking lives.”

“When I said I wouldn’t tell anyone, I meant it.” Shauna clapped a hand on Van’s shoulder. Shauna was touching her. She didn’t care that Van was a dyke and she wasn’t even afraid to touch her now. “And that includes Jackie. It isn’t her business. It isn’t my business. But… Jackie isn’t—she’s not like that, either. I just gotta say that, cause she’d be pissed if she knew I was letting people think that she was some sort of… bigot or something.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. I just mean… not everybody is as chill as you are about this shit. Most people aren’t.”

“Yeah.” Shauna dropped her arm to her side. ‘But she is. I’m not gonna tell her or anything, don’t worry. I’m just saying… I know people have this impression of her and—well, she definitely doesn’t hate lesbians. I guess that’s what I’m saying. I get why you’re keeping it a secret, trust me. Just—you don’t need to feel bad or—or different or whatever and you don’t need to think all your friends would hate you if they knew. Cause I know that feels shitty.’ Shauna blushed a deep, ruddy red. “Probably,” she added hastily. “I know that, uh, probably feels really shitty.”

Shauna had caught Van and Tai, but she was the deer in headlights. Van could tell that she regretted saying anything at all and suddenly it clicked.

Holy shit.

All those sideways glances were meaningful sideways glances. Those trips to the bathroom were the same trips to the bathroom that Van and Taissa made. Jackie wasn’t all up in Shauna’s space all the time because she was some controlling stage mom. She was, like, actively fawning over her. Damn, and Van couldn’t even tell Tai, cause this was like some next-level dyke secrecy pact shit.

“Okay, yeah. I—I believe you, dude.” Van gave her a warm smile. “Thanks for… telling me that.”

Shauna nodded once, clearing her throat. “Van?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you have a tampon?”

Fall 1996

Jackie stared up at her, her pretty eyes wide. Shauna’s heart pounded even harder.

Oh fuck.

She braced herself, waiting for Jackie to yell or snap at her or shove her to the ground. She stilled the fingers she’d been running through Jackie’s hair, resting them limply on the side of her head.

They were drunk. Maybe not as drunk as they were pretending to be, but definitely not sober. They’d gotten ready for bed quickly but then… Jackie had kissed her in the ensuite and

suddenly they were stumbling into her room, tangled up in each other. Usually this didn't bleed over into their own homes. Usually when Jackie whined and wiggled her hips against Shauna it was somewhere else—somewhere temporary.

But that night, Jackie had shoved Shauna back onto her bed and straddled her hips. When Shauna had started to guide her into gentle rocking motions, the bed had squeaked and Jackie had panicked about her parents overhearing. Shauna had flipped them over, blushing furiously, but somehow plucked up the courage to ask Jackie if maybe she could touch her—over her clothes, of course—because then the bed wouldn't squeak. She'd rambled about how it wasn't that different from what they normally did, trying to convince herself as much as Jackie. But Jackie had agreed quickly. And she'd really seemed to enjoy herself. Even still, Shauna couldn't help but fear that there would be consequences for her stupid bold actions.

Jackie drew in a heavy, shuddering breath. "It feels different," she rasped, her chest heaving.

"I—what?" Shauna whispered back. She tried to make sense of Jackie's words, but she was too busy taking in her face. Her perfect, flushed, bare face, lit just enough by the one streetlight on her block for Shauna to appreciate it.

This, she realized, was the first time that she'd seen Jackie finish without makeup on. In pajamas instead of a dress. In her bed instead of Mari's bathroom or Lottie's guest room or Shauna's car. Looking like her best friend Jackie, not drunk party Jackie.

Holy fuck.

And how was Shauna supposed to make sense of the words that Jackie said, when she was licking her lips right after saying them?

"You said it isn't that different than what we—" Shauna's fingers grazed Jackie's neck as she readjusted. Jackie twitched, took another deep labored breath, parted her lips again. "—what we normally do."

"Oh, I—Jackie, I'm sor—"

Shauna couldn't finish her sentence, because while she'd been distracted by Jackie's pretty face, Jackie had snuck her hand between their bodies. She'd pressed her fingers against Shauna in exactly the right spot—over her pajamas, just as Shauna had done with her. Jackie was still panting as she drew her fingers in a small, experimental circle. The reaction was instantaneous. Shauna made a sound somewhere between a gasp and a moan that was far too loud.

Jackie's eyes flew open even wider. She brought her free hand up to cover Shauna's mouth and lifted her head off of the bed to close the short distance between them, her lips brushing Shauna's ear. "It feels different."

Shauna whimpered against Jackie's hand, already struggling to hold herself up on her elbow. The fingers that'd been resting lightly against Jackie's hair gripped it tight.

"Shhh," Jackie hushed, circling faster.

Shauna was pushed close to actual tears from the pleasure. She couldn't believe how different it felt than when she touched herself, couldn't have predicted how much her body

would respond to Jackie's touch. She wanted to keep watching Jackie—her lip drawn between her teeth in concentration and her hazel eyes round and soft—but she couldn't keep her eyes open. She squeezed them shut, along with her lips, to try and stifle the noises that were desperate to pour out of her. Once Jackie seemed satisfied with Shauna's self control, she took her hand off of her mouth and wrapped it around the back of her neck. Shauna bit her lip hard enough to know that a bruise would soon form there, but the pain helped distract her. Helped her stay quiet when she felt like she ought to be screaming.

Her abs tensed and shook. Her arms started to stall out beneath her. She let out another whimper, a little too loud.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh," Jackie whispered, pulling Shauna's head down into the crook of her neck. Shauna immediately pressed her lips to the skin there—a little sweaty, tasting of salt—not so much kissing it as trying to physically force her mouth to stay shut.

Leaning down made it even harder to keep herself propped up. Jackie seemed to notice her struggling, because she put a hand on her ass—Shauna had to work particularly hard to soften the noise that dragged out of her throat—and pulled straight down. Shauna didn't budge.

"Shipman," Jackie whispered, fingers pressing hard against her.

Shauna shook her head a little. "Mmmm," she huffed out. She couldn't fucking talk right now.

"Lay down."

"Nnnnuhh," Shauna groaned into Jackie's neck. She moved her lips a fraction of an inch away, so that she could attempt to form real words. "I'll crush you." It came out slurred and breathy, her voice hitching in the middle when Jackie's circles grew faster.

"No you will not." Jackie yanked down and Shauna had no choice but to oblige. Her body no longer felt as though it was under her control. She truly felt like it belonged to Jackie. Like she belonged to Jackie. The way that Shauna liked that feeling terrified her. She was wet and hot and desperate for it. None of her usual resentment was present when this was the context.

She was laying directly on top of Jackie, pressed against her from head to toe. Her face was still buried in Jackie's neck, her hand still gripping her hair. She kept her hips lifted a few inches, so that Jackie could keep touching her.

Jackie used her other hand to smooth back Shauna's hair. "Does it feel good?" she asked softly. Shauna nodded. She kissed Jackie's neck softly, pecks between shaky inhales all that she could manage. Jackie whispered, lowering her voice so much that Shauna wasn't sure if she was supposed to hear, later worried that she'd imagined it: "I love you, Shauna."

Real or not, that did it for her. She felt herself clenching, her whole body twitching at odd intervals. Jackie roughly lifted Shauna's head off her shoulder so that she could kiss her. When Jackie finished, Shauna liked to watch her. Liked it best when she could get Jackie to maintain eye contact the whole fucking time. Didn't want her to forget who had made her feel that way. Jackie though—she liked to force their lips together just as Shauna neared the edge. She liked to catch the noises Shauna made on her tongue and swallow them down. She liked when Shauna sank her teeth into her bottom lip too hard. She liked to kiss Shauna until she

couldn't take it anymore, until she was panting into her mouth, trying desperately to break away for air. And then Jackie would kiss Shauna just a little longer.

Winter 1997

"Listen, Shipman." Nat knelt in front of her. "I know you can hear me in there."

Shauna was sitting on the floor with her back against the rickety chair. She hadn't moved in four hours. Nat knew exactly how long because she'd been watching her, along with the steady movement of the sun, as she'd woven strips of bear pelt into a makeshift blanket. She was so pregnant now, Nat wondered how she was even sitting upright. Her stomach stuck out angrily, like something was trying to push through the flesh. It wouldn't have been hard. There was no fat on any of them anymore. Nat thought that maybe Sadecki's little devil spawn could just suckerpunch her in the gut, if it really wanted out that way.

Shauna had fallen into a routine after Jackie died. It consisted mostly of staring into space, avoiding food and water, and talking to herself. Well, talking to Jackie, it seemed. She didn't do it that much in front of them. Nat had only heard it twice, both times when she'd snuck halfway up the ladder to listen for signs of life, worried that Shauna had offed herself in that creepy fucking attic and they'd have to drag another corpse out of it.

For the week immediately after, Shauna had been hysterical. Not hysterical in the way that men sometimes liked to call women when they pissed them off. Hysterical in the truest sense of the word. Like, they'd all seen some terrifying shit and this was, without a fucking doubt, the scariest. She'd screamed and cried until her throat had actually bled. She'd coughed it up —bright red, fresh blood—for hours. After that, Shauna'd had no voice for a long while. Lottie had thought that her body had been spilling blood for her, out of desperation, or whatever.

(Vocal cord hemorrhage, Misty had called it. Said that they couldn't be sure if she'd ever speak again.)

She did get her voice back though, about a month later. She might've physically gotten it back sooner—none of them were sure—but the first time that she spoke, it was because Akilah and Mari were fighting. Standing in the main room, screaming at each other over something that neither of them would've even cared about if they weren't starving and exhausted. Shauna had put herself between them and told them to stop it. That was it. She hadn't needed to say anything more, because hearing her voice for the first time in a month? Hearing her speak calm, sensical words for the first time in longer than a month? That'd silenced everyone.

Shauna was currently locked firmly in the staring into space and avoiding food and water phases of her routine.

Nat had watched Tai try to force her out of it. She'd begged her, gotten in her face, shaken her shoulders, told her to woman up, cried when that didn't work, begged all over again. Van had pulled her away from Shauna eventually. Next had come Lottie, setting a glass of water in front of her and sitting beside her for a half hour. She'd left space between them—Shauna was touch adverse a lot of the time now.

(That first week—the infamous screaming and eventual throat bleeding week—Shauna hadn't gone more than a few minutes without someone's hands on her. They'd had to keep a tight grasp on her, taking it in shifts, because she'd bolt outside if they didn't. Lottie and Van had been tightlipped about where they'd buried Jackie. They'd told everyone, besides Shauna of course, that they were worried that she would try and dig up her body if she knew where it was. Nat thought it was cruel, but she also thought that they were probably right. So she took her shifts, clutching Shauna's hand in her own and trying to give her space when she could.)

After Lottie gave up on her water efforts, Misty had tried to physically force it down Shauna's throat. Her mouth had been hanging open a little as she sat, so Misty had tilted the abandoned glass to her lips. Shauna had spluttered and coughed, spitting it out, all of the water trailing down her chin or hitting Misty square in her concerned face.

It was Nat's turn to try. She was better with Shauna than most of them, especially when she was in this space. Tai was good with her when she was hysterical, pulling her in and soothing her like no one else could. But when she was distant, Nat had the most success. She knew what it felt like to be stuck in your own shitty world.

"I'm gonna sit with you, Shauna," Nat said, low and slow, like trying not to spook an animal. Except she wasn't trying to kill this one, she was trying to save it. She sat in the space Lottie had vacated a few hours ago. Shauna didn't react. Nat tried something different. She laid her hand out, palm up, in the space between them. "I think you need some help, man. I know these bitches aren't the best at giving it, and fuck if I'm much better, but I really think you do. Will you… uh, let me try?"

Shauna's eyes shut, a tear sliding down her cheek. Good. That was good.

"I'm not gonna speak for her," Nat said softly. "I would never try to do that. You knew her better than anyone—"

"Natalie!" Tai snapped from the corner of the room.

Of course she'd been listening—she watched Shauna like a hawk lately. And Nat was actively breaking the cardinal rule of dealing with Shauna—do not, under any circumstances, bring up Jackie Taylor. Clearly that wasn't working. No one let Shauna talk about her. They shushed her when she did, afraid she'd fall deeper into… well, madness. But she was deep enough already. She'd taken a nosedive straight into the deep end. She wasn't coming out of it, she was drowning in it. So, Nat thought that they were probably going to have to jump in after her, instead of yelling down at her from the nice safe tile at the pool's edge.

Nat gave Tai her best glare. She tried to stand anyway, but Van—who seemed almost afraid of Shauna lately, avoiding her most of the time—pulled her into her arms and held her firmly against her chest. Nat fixed her attention back on Shauna. She hadn't fully gone away yet, her eyes were still screwed shut.

"What'd I tell you?" Nat sighed dramatically. "These bitches really aren't the pick of the litter."

Shauna reacted. It was almost nothing, but Nat caught it. She'd breathed out quickly through her nose. A near laugh.

Shit, okay. Okay, keep going.

“Like I was saying, you knew her better than anyone. That’s not up for debate. But… I think I knew her well enough to say she’d be pretty pissed at you for trying to kill yourself, Shipman.”

Shauna swallowed, her throat bobbing quickly. She opened her eyes. They were glassy, but that was better—so much better—because if she was crying she was with them. Shauna shifted her gaze to her lap. Nat flexed her fingers, just a little, but it was enough to catch Shauna’s eye. She placed her hand on top of Nat’s upturned one, loosely resting it there. Nat took a deep breath and squeezed.

“Plus, I can’t handle listening to Taissa for one more goddamn second. So… I’m gonna need you to start sipping on that water.”

Shauna picked up the glass with a shaky hand and brought it to her lips, taking what might very well have been the world’s smallest sip, but it was something.

They sat there silently, her hand in Nat’s, for another twenty minutes. Shauna had only choked down half the glass when Nat heard Lottie whispering to Van. They probably thought that she couldn’t hear them, their voices kept low, but all of their lives depended on Nat hearing much softer noises.

“She spilled blood over her,” Lottie said quickly.

Nat rolled her eyes. She didn’t want to know what they were saying. Really, she fucking didn’t. But she tuned in anyway. She couldn’t help but worry about them, especially Lottie.

Lottie, who she’d thought she’d known pretty damn well.

Lottie, who used to sneak her cheesy good luck kisses in the locker room before games. Lottie, who said that she hated being called Charlotte, but grinned like an idiot whenever Nat did it. Lottie, the only person who Nat would let touch her after her dad died. Lottie, who didn’t have someone to keep her tethered like Van had Tai. Lottie, whose someone used to be Nat.

But that Lottie was long gone. The new Lottie was the type of crazy that no one could control. She was spreading like wildfire and Nat couldn’t risk the burns she’d get if she tried to pull her out of her own creation. She had other people to save. Girls who were different kinds of crazy. Girls who she could protect from themselves. Girls like Shauna.

“Yeah, but I just don’t get—” Van started to respond, but Nat jumped to her feet, startling her into silence.

Because this wasn’t just any old crazy talk. Van had eyed Shauna as she’d said it. Poor, wounded, broken Shauna, who couldn’t put up a fight worth shit right now, even if she wanted to.

“Who spilled blood?” Nat whisper-yelled. “I swear to fucking God, you better not be talking about her.” She jerked her head back toward Shauna, who’d taken the glass between both hands when Nat had dropped hers and was staring into it blankly.

“Nat, calm down—” Van pleaded, her eyes flicking to Shauna.

“No! I will not calm down! Look at her, man!” Nat kept her volume low but her tone harsh. She didn’t want to alert Tai, who was outside gathering firewood, because the last thing

she needed was her barreling in right now. “She can’t consent to being a part of your weird shit right now, she’s like… like a fucking baby, dude!”

They said nothing. Nat zeroed in on Lottie. Lottie whose cheeks were pink, Lottie whose pretty hair was framing her face, Lottie who was shaking like a struck child.

“Did you hurt her?” Natalie demanded, the words choking her on the way out.

“No,” Lottie whispered. She shook her head fiercely. “We didn’t do anything, Natalie.”

“Fuck!” Natalie spat under her breath. She turned back to Shauna, dropping to her knees a few feet from her. ‘Shauna— “She was still staring into her glass. Nat was going to lose her any second.” Hey, Shipman, I’m sorry.’ Nat scooted towards her. “You gotta stay with me, yeah? Just for a little bit.”

Shauna frowned, looked up and to the left—over Nat’s shoulder. Nat turned. No one was there. Shauna nodded at the empty space. Her fucking hallucinations again.

“Shauna, did they… did they do something to you? Did they, y’know… cut you or anything?”

“What?” Shauna blinked at her.

“Nat, we wouldn’t fucking—”

“Shut the fuck up, Palmer,” Nat snarled over her shoulder.

Van looked away, her arms wrapped around her stomach and her face paler than usual, the red of her scars standing out.

“Okay, Shauna. Can you remember if they did something… weird to you? Or… or did you hurt yourself recently?”

Shauna just tilted her head at Nat, like a dog that didn’t understand a command. “I… don’t know,” she whispered. “I don’t think so?”

“Are you—”

Shauna’s eyes glazed over—going, going, gone. There was no point pushing. Her jaw was slack and her pupils were blown.

“Damnit,” Nat snapped under her breath. “Shauna, I’m gonna check you, okay? Just—I’m sorry, but I gotta check.”

She rolled Shauna’s sleeves up with shaky hands, searching for damage. Shauna ignored her, or maybe didn’t even notice her, which was more terrifying because fuck, what could Lottie and Van have done to her without her even realizing?

“Nat, stop,” Lottie begged. “You’re being ridiculous.”

Nat just shook her head and moved down to Shauna’s legs. None of the pants fit her anymore, not even with her shoelace belt. She’d taken to wrapping a blanket above her bump and tying it off with a heavy rope, like some ugly bastardization of a skirt.

Nat peeled it back, starting at her feet and rolling her legs side to side to check every inch of them. She moved methodically, all the way up to her thighs. Shauna just let her. A fucking

rag doll—she didn't help, she didn't resist. She was dead weight.

No marks. Nat tucked the blanket around her again before standing to face Lottie and Van. Van had tears in her eyes, one hand woven through her own hair. She looked like she might puke. Lottie's lip was trembling but, other than that slight give, she was in control of herself.

"Listen to me," Nat snarled. 'Neither of you touches her.' She pointed at each of them in turn, her finger inches from their chests. "Someone asks you to, you make an excuse. I don't care what it is. Use those big imaginations of yours. But you stay the fuck away from her."

Spring 1996

Jackie clicked record on her dad's old tape player. She'd been waiting in front of it the entire commercial break, perched on her hands and knees. They were in Shauna's bedroom, drunk on a bottle of whiskey that Jackie had swiped from her parents' liquor cabinet.

Shauna was sitting on the floor, her legs stretched out in front of her and her back against her bed. She took small, lazy sips straight out of the bottle, as she watched Jackie twist the volume up on the radio.

"Up next, already at number two on the Hot 100—Mariah's new single, *Always Be My Baby.* My girlfriend won't stop playing this one, it's nonstop at my house. I hope all the ladies listening at home enjoy it as much as she does."

The male radio host laughed a little as he spoke. Jackie squealed, jumping to her feet, and Shauna grinned.

"Jackie," Shauna chastised playfully. "I told you you'd talk through it."

Jackie ignored the reprimand, mouthing a few of the do-do-do-dums and swaying her shoulders to the beat as she walked. She pursed her lips comically, puckering them up and zipping her pinched fingers across them, and reached for Shauna. Shauna rolled her eyes and shook her head in protest, but Jackie just kneeled down and plucked the bottle out of her hand. She took a not so little swig and set it aside.

We were as one, babe

For a moment in time

"You're gonna dance with me, Shipman," Jackie said sternly. She swayed on the spot—not intentionally this time—and Shauna grabbed her waist with both hands, steadying her.

And it seemed everlasting

That you would always be mine

"You're not being as quiet as you think you are."

Now you want to be free

So I'm lettin' you fly

“I don’t care, we’ll record over it later. Whatever,” Jackie whined, covering Shauna’s hands with her own to keep them glued to her waist. Her white t-shirt was tight and short, bunching up and leaving the skin above her Wiskayok High sweats bare. “Dance with me.”

’Cause I know in my heart babe

Our love will never die

Shauna pulled herself up with a sigh, wrapping her arms around Jackie’s waist and drawing her flush against herself. Jackie giggled, high and light, and threw her arms around Shauna’s neck.

No you’ll always be a part of me

I’m part of you indefinitely

“Happy?” Shauna asked, rocking Jackie in her arms. She tried to sound relaxed. A little annoyed, even, to cover for the way that her heart was pounding in her chest, which Jackie could probably fucking feel, because her own chest was right there.

Boy don’t you know you can’t escape me

Oh darlin’ ’cause you’ll always be my baby

There was, like, absolutely no space between them and both of their shirts were thin cotton and Shauna’s mouth was so dry from the drinking and—

“Like, the happiest ever,” Jackie said softly. Shauna searched her eyes. She sounded serious. Earnest suddenly. “You make me so fucking happy.”

And we’ll linger on

Time can’t erase a feelin’ this strong

“You make me happy, too.” Shauna brought a hand up to the back of her head, coaxing her to rest her forehead against the crook of her neck. Jackie hummed happily, turning her face so that she was resting her cheek against Shauna’s shoulder instead. She sang along quietly, her breath hot against Shauna’s neck.

No way you’re never gonna shake me

Oh darlin’ cause you’ll always be my baby

I ain’t gonna cry, no

Shauna rubbed Jackie’s back, her fingers boldly grazing across her bare skin. She let her eyes fall shut, memorizing the feel of her.

And I won’t beg you to stay

If you’re determined to leave boy

I will not stand in your way

“Do you like this song?” Jackie mumbled. She combed her fingers through Shauna’s hair, massaging her scalp in that drunk, messy way that she liked to.

But inevitably you'll be back again

The radio host's words had sounded like something akin to prophecy to Shauna. She tried not to think about the implications of relating to a man discussing his girlfriend's music taste and cleared her throat.

'Cause you know in your heart, babe

Our love will never end, no

"I do… as of now," Shauna giggled. "I have a feeling I won't so much, by the time you're done playing it to death."

You'll always be apart of me

I'm part of you indefinitely

"Mmmm, I can't until I get the stupid CD." Jackie pulled back to look at her. "Clearly, this tape isn't working out." She was struggling to keep a straight face, biting back a grin.

Boy don't you know you can't escape me

Oh darlin' 'cause you'll always be my baby

"Oh, clearly, huh?" Shauna took advantage of the interruption, pulling both of them back to the ground. Jackie yelped. They both laughed louder.

And we'll linger on

Time can't erase a feelin' this strong

"Who gave you that idea, Jax?"

No way you're never gonna shake me

Oh darlin' 'cause you'll always be my baby

"Shauna!" Jackie giggled. "The song isn't over yet! You said you'd dance with me." She pouted dramatically, crossing her arms and scrunching her nose.

I know that you'll be back boy

When your days and your nights get a little bit colder oh

Shauna scooted herself back to her spot against the bed. "Mmm, actually," she ran a hand through Jackie's hair, "you said I'd dance with you. I'm tired and it's almost over."

You'll be right back, baby

Oh baby believe me it's only a matter of time, time

Jackie let out a loud huff in protest. She threw a leg over both of Shauna's, straddling her hips. Her arms locked around Shauna's neck, wrists overlapping behind her head and resting on the bed behind them. She started swaying to the beat again and Shauna chuckled, wrapping her arms around her waist.

Jackie sang the entirety of the last chorus—properly loud this time, her pretty voice filling the room. She kept her eyes locked on Shauna's, one hand playing with the ends of her hair.

Her mascara was smudged under her eyes and her cheeks were rounder when she smiled like this and Shauna thought that she might be the prettiest girl in the world, let alone New Jersey.

You'll always be apart of me

I'm part of you indefinitely

Boy don't you know you can't escape me

Oh darlin' 'cause you'll always be my baby

And we'll linger on

Time can't erase a feelin' this strong

No way you're never gonna shake me

Ooh darlin' 'cause you'll always be my baby

Spring 1995

Shauna jumped to slide her jeans over her hips. Jeff was already dressed, so he watched her from his seat on the floor of her attic bedroom. She pulled a face when she caught him looking, scrunching her nose at him like she found it a little disgusting. Which didn't make any sense, considering the fact that she had come on to him—passing by his locker after third period to basically demand that he swing by her place before the party tonight.

He and Jackie had been fighting for over a month, which meant that Shauna had been avoiding him, too. Now that he and Jackie were getting along again, Jeff knew that he should try and lean into that—focus on her—but there was just something about Shauna that he couldn't shake. When she said jump, he said how far. Or… whatever that phrase was. (No, that was definitely it. Or—fuck, he'd ask Shauna later.)

"Jeff," Shauna said, snapping her fingers at him.

He shook his head and cleared his throat. "Yeah?" he asked, dazed. He couldn't help but stare at her chest. She still hadn't put a shirt on and her bra was one of those push up ones that he knew Jackie had picked out for her. (He found himself wondering, once again, if most girls helped their friends pick clothes with the specific goal of making their tits look nicer, but damn, was Jackie good at it.)

"Jesus Christ," Shauna muttered, pulling a striped v-neck over her head quickly.

"Sorry." Jeff swallowed hard. "What's up?"

Shauna rolled her eyes and marched over to her CD player, cranking down the Smashing Pumpkins album they'd started when they were pretending that they were just gonna hang out. They never just hung out. Not the two of them. Not without Jackie. Jeff sort of thought that he might enjoy it, though.

"I said," Shauna spat, "hand me that hairbrush you're sitting on."

She made a grabbing motion and Jeff looked around himself until he found it—against the wall, just to the left of him. Sunshine yellow with little hearts drawn on it in sharpie. He raised an eyebrow at her as he handed it over.

"Jackie's," she mumbled, raking it through her hair aggressively. 'I think mine is at hers.' Jeff nodded. Shauna finished with her hair and added more black pencil around her eyes, before turning to face him again. "Let's go."

Jeff checked his watch. "We still have, like, twenty minutes before we need to pick Jax up." He sank down further against the wall in silent protest, halfway to horizontal.

"Don't call her that, Jeff." Shauna glared fucking daggers at him. "I don't like it."

"Damn, Shauna." Jeff ran a hand through his hair, trying to ignore the stir in his stomach that came whenever she got feisty like that. "Why are you so weird about her?"

"I'm not." Shauna tossed her hair over her shoulder. "She doesn't like it either."

I bet she really wouldn't like us fucking, Jeff argued in his head, but here we are.

"She's never had an issue with it, dude," Jeff said carefully. He didn't want to back down, but he knew that he was treading into dangerous territory. "It's… just you."

"Yeah, well, maybe she just doesn't tell you." Instead of bending over to set it down, Shauna dropped her makeup bag on the floor from a distance, letting everything in it spill out. "Can we go now or what?"

It was really fucking annoying how fucking hot Shauna Shipman was when she was pissed.

Jeff stood, reaching for Shauna's waist. "I think I'm into you for real," he mumbled, without thinking.

Shauna sidestepped him. "No, you aren't. You just think you are because I put out. Don't ever say that shit again." She pushed past him towards the door, grabbing his car keys and shaking them over her shoulder. As soon as he took them, she started down the steps. "And don't ever try to hug me, or whatever the fuck that was, again."

Fall 1996

Shauna shook the leaves of an overgrown bush, hoping for some berries to magically appear out of thin air and fall to the ground beneath it. No such luck.

Her stomach twisted angrily. That damn baby was going to eat her alive.

"I just… I still can't believe you didn't tell me that you lost it."

Jackie had been relentless in her pursuit of details on the act that'd gotten Shauna into this whole situation. Shauna had been relatively close-lipped about it, worried that Jackie would somehow figure out what she'd been oblivious to for so long—that it was Jeff's baby, that Shauna had been cheating with him, that she'd been lying to her for years. Shauna had deflected and downplayed and she'd been surprisingly successful.

But Shauna was hungry. She was tired. And she was pissed that Jackie wouldn't just come out and tell her that she was upset. So Shauna said something that she never would've if they hadn't been starving in the middle of nowhere.

"Are you jealous?" The exhaustion helped her sound calm, but her heart hammered against her ribs and she could feel her ears growing warmer.

Jackie blinked at her a few times. Opened her mouth, shut it, ran a shaky hand through her hair. Then she plastered on the fakest smile that Shauna had ever seen. "Of you? No offense, but I don't think anyone's ideal scenario is a teen pregnancy in the wilderness, Shipman." Jackie probably would've pulled off the easy, relaxed tone that she was aiming for if she wasn't also exhausted and starving, but it looked forced, sounded forced, felt forced.

Bullshit.

Shauna responded immediately, giving herself no time to back out. "No. Of him."

(Him, she said. Not specifying which him. Because then she wasn't technically lying.)

"I—what?" Jackie's fake smile vanished. Shauna watched her chest rise and fall quicker under her stupid striped sweater.

"Are you jealous of him, Jackie? That we had sex. Are you jealous that he was… with me like that?"

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Do you want me to be jealous of him?" Jackie's voice didn't waver like Shauna had expected it to. She stood up straight, her arms tight across her chest.

"Why do you do that?" Shauna asked, her breath hitching. "Why do you turn it around on me every time? I asked you first." She twisted the sleeves of her flannel between her fingers roughly. No energy to cry, even though every fiber of her being was fucking agony.

Jackie swallowed hard and took a step back, leaning against the tree behind her. "Because I'm scared that every question you ask me has a right answer and wrong answer and I don't know what you want me to say to this one." She pressed one hand firmly over her eyes.

"I just want you to tell me the truth," Shauna snapped. Hypocrite. Shauna was a fucking hypocrite. She hadn't meant to sound angry. She was too tired, shouldn't have started this in the first place.

Jackie was crying softly. Her hand shook against her eyes. Shauna could tell that she was trying to be tough. She could see ten-year-old Jackie—sitting at the edge of the pool, her hair dripping wet, her skinny arms wrapped around her stomach, trying not to cry after her mom told her to stop being so obnoxious. They'd just been playing, like kids do. Probably more reserved, actually, than kids normally were.

Shauna was a fucking asshole.

"Hey, Jax. Forget it." Shauna gripped Jackie's wrist to try and pry her hand away from her face. Jackie stayed stubborn, shaking her head and refusing to budge. Her shoulders shook with silent sobs. 'I'm sorry,' Shauna said softly. "We can drop it."

Shauna gave up, letting her hand fall to her side, and Jackie finally did the same. She was all doe-eyes and quivering lips. It felt impossible that she was so pretty. Even in the woods. Even crying. Ridiculously fucking pretty.

Shauna's heart squeezed.

"You know—" Jackie let out the most pitiful, quiet sob. Shauna's arms automatically flew up to her shoulders. She wanted to pull Jackie against her chest, but she wasn't sure how she'd react. Jackie fixed her eyes on the mess of dirt and rocks and twigs between their feet. "You know how I feel. I—I—" She was working herself up into a panic, her face flushed.

Shauna took the risk, coaxing Jackie into her arms and holding her tight. Her whole body was shaking. It took her a few seconds to react, but eventually she slipped her arms around Shauna's waist and fisted her hands into the back of her shirt.

Why is this so fucking hard?

"I don't know, Jax. I don't. You're—you're mad at me. I can tell," Shauna dissolved into tears, exhaustion be damned. Fucking hormones. "But you're, like, joking about me being with him and I can't tell what you—"

Jackie pulled back to look at her. Her cheeks were sticky-wet and her eyes were red-rimmed. She gripped Shauna's flannel tighter, leaned in, and kissed her.

Sober. So sober they couldn't pretend that there was still some alcohol in their systems from earlier in the night. The first fucking time that they'd kissed where they couldn't blame it on the alcohol. And it was bliss. Jackie was still crying and Shauna sort of was too and her stomach was still twisting and she felt a little nauseous and still.

Bliss.

Shauna cupped Jackie's jaw, holding her in place. Her stomach was a barrier between them and she just wanted to press closer to her and she hated that fucking baby more than ever. She ran her tongue over Jackie's lips, begging her to part them. But Jackie didn't. She pulled away and stared at Shauna intently, her eyes moving all over her face like she was searching for something.

"I'm just trying to be a good friend but I'm… hurt," Jackie whispered. "I'm hurting so much. And I know I totally don't have a right to be."

"You do," Shauna choked out. "You do, Jackie, you do. I'm sorry." Suddenly Shauna was the one shaking. Jackie pulled her in this time and Shauna buried her face in the crook of her neck.

Finish the sentence. Just finish it.

I'm sorry I fucked your boyfriend. I'm sorry I lied to you. I'm sorry I got knocked up. I'm sorry I got so jealous. I'm sorry I didn't know why. I'm sorry I can't just tell you.

"Shhhh, no. It's okay," Jackie murmured into her hair, running a hand up and down her back slowly. "It's all gonna be okay."

Shauna was too dizzy. The tears had stolen the little energy she had left. Her knees buckled beneath her and Jackie gripped her waist hard.

“Hey, let’s get you back. Can you walk?”

“No, I’m… I’m okay. Can we just stay for a while?” Shauna pleaded with her, but she was seeing spots—black specks in her periphery.

“Shauna,” Jackie said gently, “I don’t think I can get you back if you pass out. I’m weak too, right now.”

Shauna let Jackie guide her arm over her shoulder and leaned into her. With Jackie’s arm planted firmly around her waist, they made their way back to camp.

Fall 1997

Tai watched as Shauna sharpened the ax. Her butcher’s knife was at her feet, the blade shining. She was lean, as were all of them, but since spring had come and they’d actually had some luck hunting again, Shauna had gained muscle.

Her flannel was tied around her waist. She fit into her clothes again—it took awhile, even after the birth—but the sun was high and hot that afternoon. She wore one of Jackie’s tank tops, tight around her much curvier frame, tucked into her jeans. Her arms were defined. She spent most of her waking hours doing physical labor now—said that she needed to make up for the months that she spent being decidedly unhelpful. Tai knew it was simply the only thing that could distract her, until she could throw herself into her makeshift bed, exhaustion granting her the gift of a night’s sleep.

She was scary now, really. Strong and sharp and rough around the edges. Nothing about her was reminiscent of the girl that Tai had spent hours holding every night after Jackie’s death. Tai still loved her—in all her pain and anger and bitterness. Something tugged at Taissa’s stomach whenever she watched her like this.

She wanted Van. She wanted Van so badly she felt it in her chest. Her want trying to escape, trying to pry her ribs apart from the inside. Pushing, pushing, pushing. But Tai couldn’t have her. Not right now. Van was in it with Lottie in a way that’d forced distance between them. She sighed, kicking a rock a few feet away. The steady scraping of blade against stone stopped and the silence was eerie—a ticking clock running out of battery, the sudden absence of a rhythm that you hadn’t even realized you were keeping time to. She turned to Shauna.

“You good?” Shauna asked, rubbing away the sweat collecting on her brow with her forearm.

“Just…” Tai exhaled shakily. “Van.”

Shauna dropped her tools, wiping her hands on her pants. “Come sit with me.” Her forehead creased with worry. She didn’t wear her emotions visibly anymore. Not often, at least. Only with Tai, only occasionally, and only when they were alone.

Tai listened, dropping down on the log next to Shauna, straddling it so that she could face her. She’d been blinking back the tears, but she couldn’t manage to any longer. Not when Shauna turned toward her and laid a gentle hand on her cheek. Shauna rarely touched her anymore and Van never touched her anymore and she didn’t want anyone else out here to

touch her. Her heart pounded on in that frustrating fucking rhythm that she should really just be able to switch off.

Van, Van, Van.

But in front of her was Shauna. Shauna with the tousled brown hair. The wide, dark eyes. The pretty, full lips.

So Tai kissed her, because she was there and she was touching her.

Shauna didn't pull away. She met the kiss—slow, steady lips moving against Tai's. Nothing passionate, nothing heated. Just… comfort. After a few minutes, Tai realized that Shauna was going to keep kissing her until she showed her that she didn't need her to anymore. She pulled back, still clutching the log between their bodies.

Shauna swiped a thumb across her cheek, brushing away some tears. There was a sad sort of calmness about her. "She's not gone," she said gently. "She's there. She might be hard to find, but she's there."

That broke something in Tai. Soft tears shifted into harsh sobs and Shauna silently pulled her into her chest and everything was a little bit better and a little bit worse, all at once.

Winter 1998

Shauna couldn't fucking believe that they'd gotten on that damn plane. That rickety, tiny, overcrowded plane. But they had. And they were home now. That's what everyone kept telling them.

Except really they'd never be home again. They were simply out of the woods. Not that Shauna wasn't grateful to be out of the woods—she very much never wanted to see a fucking tree again. Shauna's main issue was that everyone wanted to touch them. Parents, siblings, old friends, old acquaintances calling themselves friends. Everyone wanted to lay hands on them, like they were one of those miracles that could be witnessed—the kind Laura Lee had always talked about. Not everyone minded. Misty seemed to be having the time of her life and Taissa had actually run straight into her sister's arms, but Shauna couldn't do it.

Her mom tried to hug her the second she burst into her hospital room. Shauna pushed her away so hard she stumbled backwards, her purse catching on the IV taped to the back of Shauna's hand and yanking it straight out. Shauna watched the liquid drip onto the ground slowly, her head down and her arms crossed firmly around her middle. She heard her mom's wrenching sobs, but she couldn't look at her. She didn't deserve to look at her. She didn't want her comfort.

Her dad came shortly after, out of breath and shaking. Shauna was pretending to be asleep when she heard her mom rise from her vigil across the room, her chair pushed as far away from Shauna as it could be, rather than up by the head of the bed where she'd tried to situate it, at the insistence of a very sympathetic nurse. Her mom shushed him, cried that they needed to give her space, dragged a chair across the tile for him.

Jeff came next. Her parents were out of the room, finally gone to get something to eat. Shauna had just pushed herself up in the bed, taking a much needed break from the feigned

sleep, when she saw him peek his head around the door.

Please don't make me tell him, God. Please let someone else have told him already. Please, please, please.

Shauna squeezed her eyes shut tight, her head bowed in actual prayer for the first time since she'd given up on converting to Catholicism. She felt his hand on her elbow. He was barely touching her, clearly trying to find the least offensive spot to do so. She opened her eyes. He was frowning. He didn't try to speak. He just kept looking at her.

"Sh—she—she" Shauna croaked out, her throat raw, fighting the tears.

Jeff moved his hand to her shoulder, rubbing his thumb back and forth over the scratchy hospital gown. "I know."

Shauna sobbed for the first time since they'd landed. For the first time in a long time. Her whole body shook and she cried like an overtired kid, letting everything go. Jeff pulled her against him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her face against his stomach, sobbing into his sweatshirt as he stood over her and rubbed her back.

"I know," he repeated, over and over. His tone and cadence were that of soothing, but the words themselves weren't. No I'm sorry or I love you or it's gonna be okay. Just I know.

For some reason, it was okay for him to comfort her. Shauna didn't feel like she was tainting him with her touch the way that she did with her parents and she was grateful for that. She needed someone to hold her, to lie to her and tell her that everything was going to be fine, and he could do that. He was doing that.

Shauna thought that maybe he was already a little tainted.

2009

Mom was talking to someone Callie couldn't see again. She said it was her imaginary friend, whenever Callie asked. But sometimes she would get so mad at her for asking, so Callie had stopped. Most of the time.

She was hungry, but she was a big girl. Big enough to pour herself some cereal. That way Mom could keep playing with her friend and she could be all proud of Callie when she told her that she did it all by herself. Callie pulled the step stool all the way to the pantry and climbed up it. She was scared of heights, and it had three steps, so she held on tight with her hands, bringing both feet onto each level before moving on to the next.

She reached for the colorful box—fruity pebbles, her favorite—and… knocked it onto the floor.

Oops.

It was okay, though. Mom always closed the bag tight with a little clippy, so that nothing would spill out. Callie held her breath—going down the steps was even scarier than going up—and made her way to the ground. She set the box upright and opened the cabinet. This one was close to the ground, so it was easy peasy. She picked her favorite bowl—yellow plastic, a

little faded, scrapes at the bottom from mom's scrubby pad—and set it on the floor. Callie shook some cereal in carefully. She overfilled the bowl a little, used her hands to grab fistfuls and drop them back into the box. She even used Mom's clippy to roll the bag shut again.

Callie scooted to the fridge and lifted the milk out of the door. It was really full, but she was super strong lately. She twisted off the lid and set it down carefully. But when she tipped the big container over the bowl, a little milk hit her cereal and then—

Crash.

The whole gallon slipped out of her hands, milk rushing to every corner of the kitchen. Her bowl fell to the side, the cereal spilling out. The bottom of the box was drenched. Her overalls were sticky and wet and her lip started to tremble.

"Callie!"

Mom.

She'd come running into the kitchen at the noise, almost slipping in the spilled milk. Callie started wailing, tears coming hot and fast. She just wanted to do it by herself.

"Fuck," Mom said under her breath. Angry—squeezing the top of her nose between her fingers really hard.

"I'm sorry, Mommy!" Callie cried. "I was doing so good but it fell everywhere." She took great, gulping breaths. Mom was crying now, too. Not the same as Callie was, not taking big swallows of air. She just looked really tired.

"C'mere, let's get you in the bath." Mom picked Callie up off of the ground. Callie wrapped her legs around her and cried into her chest. "Shhh, Callie, it's fine. I'm not mad, just—please, stop crying." She sounded mad, even if she said she wasn't.

Callie cried harder. Mom stripped her icky clothes off and rinsed her in the shower quickly, because she couldn't calm down enough to sit in the tub. Then Mom wrapped her in her favorite towel. It was pink and it had a hood on it, so that Callie could dry her hair at the same time as her body. She lifted Callie into her arms again and sat down right there on the bathroom floor, pulling her into her lap. They both cried until Daddy got home, a little bit later, and sat on the floor with them. He looked tired, just like Mom. But he was strong, so he pulled mom onto his lap like she'd done with Callie and they were all in one big pile.

Callie felt a little better, but she was still hungry.

2001

Shauna hated the dress. It felt so wrong on her. But it was cheap, her mom had helped her pick it out, and there was nothing wrong with it, really. It wasn't the dress's fault that this wedding felt the way it did.

She wanted Jackie with an ache so fierce it threatened to strangle her. She'd imagined her wedding day before—what girl hadn't been practically forced to—but Jackie's was always the face that she saw. Shauna didn't even see her own dress. Hadn't wondered about what

she'd want to wear. Most of the time, Shauna just saw Jackie in a bridesmaid's dress—circling her, fixing her hair, grinning at her, looking so beautiful. That's how she'd envisioned her big day. She'd closed her eyes and she'd see Jackie.

(Shauna had realized, eventually, that maybe she was supposed to be picturing her handsome groom in addition to her beautiful maid of honor, so she'd tried to come up with something. She never managed to conjure up her dream man, though. She just kept seeing hazel eyes and high cheekbones and pouty lips.)

Sometimes, late at night when she felt safer with her thoughts, Shauna let herself imagine Jackie in a white dress. Jackie's hair pinned up in dainty little baretes, a few strategic strands left out and curled around her face. Shauna had always tried to pretend that she was imagining her own future bridesmaid duties, but that got a lot fucking harder to do when she saw herself standing across from Jackie instead of at her side.

Jackie holding both of Shauna's hands while some officiant spoke. Shauna would probably miss every goddamn word if she was standing up there with Jackie, watching her cry, because of course Jackie would cry at her wedding. She was a gorgeous crier, especially when the tears were paired with a smile—all wide eyes and pink cheeks—but she'd have to wear waterproof mascara and she'd always hated trying to get that off at the end of the night. But Shauna would remember that. She'd slip baby oil and cotton pads into her suitcase and she'd press them to Jackie's eyes before they went to bed and she'd patiently wait for it to dissolve. Shauna wouldn't let Jackie attack her pretty lashes with a wet rag.

But Shauna wasn't going to marry Jackie. Marrying a woman wasn't legal and Jackie never would've wanted to marry her even if it was and Jackie was dead. Shauna was going to marry Jeff. She added another coat of mascara to her own lashes.

Not waterproof.

Fall 1996

Everyone had paired off. Jackie and Shauna, Van and Tai—nothing new there. Misty could've predicted that. Lottie and Laura Lee made sense, too. They were both sort of… different, but in the same way. Akilah and Mari had bonded quickly and Misty understood that—both younger, both coming in without a built in best friend. And, of course, Misty had Ben.

The only thing that Misty couldn't understand was what Nat saw in Travis. He seemed so… uninteresting. Nat connected with a lot of people. She and Ben were friends, even if Misty didn't like it very much (it made her feel a little queasy when she saw them together). She and Lottie had been close before and Misty still caught them staring at each other sometimes. She'd seen Nat joke around with Van a lot since they got out here.

Nat was an outsider too, back at school, but not in the same way that Misty was. Nat listened to the wrong music and wore the wrong clothes, but she did it in the right way. People liked her. They thought that she was a burnout, but they thought that she was cool. Misty just did the wrong things in the wrong way. She wondered what it would be like to be Nat's friend. She was harsh around the edges, but it seemed nice and warm for the people

who got to be in her circle. All that to say, Travis seemed like Nat's least appealing option, if you asked Misty.

Misty was sitting in the main room, watching everyone finish their meager dinner. Jackie and Shauna were sitting together, nearest to her. Jackie looked like she'd been crying and Shauna looked a little pissed off. When Jackie reached for her hand, Shauna moved hers away quickly. The rejection prompted Jackie to jump to her feet, muttering something about going for a walk. Javi was with Travis, Ben was with Nat, Van was with Tai, Mari was with Akilah, and Lottie was with Laura Lee. But now that Jackie had left, Shauna was alone. Misty took her chance, scooting over to her.

"Hi, Shauna." Misty slotted herself right where Jackie had been. Shauna jumped. She was like that, sometimes—lost in her thoughts. Easily startled.

"Hey, Misty." Shauna sighed deeply. She was probably sad about Jackie leaving her. They'd been practically attached at the hip since elementary school and seeing one of them without the other was almost strange.

"Are you okay?" Misty asked, pushing her glasses up.

Shauna laughed a little. "As okay as everybody else," she mumbled, picking at her cuticles.

"Oh…" Misty furrowed her brow. "It's just… you didn't look as okay as everybody else, just now. But maybe I'm wrong!"

Shauna shook her head and buried her face in her hands.

Oh, shoot. I'm screwing this up.

While Misty waited for Shauna to speak, she started watching Nat again. She was leaning back against the wall, her hands behind her head. She looked so relaxed like that—talking to Ben, making him laugh without even turning her head towards him. Misty made a mental note to try sitting like that the next time she hung out with him.

She looked back at Shauna, who hadn't moved. Apparently Misty was going to have to talk again, even though it was really Shauna's turn to say something. She cleared her throat. "Sorry if I shouldn't have said anything. If I had a friend and we were as close as you and Jackie are, I just think I'd be sad if we fought."

Shauna inhaled, deep and shaky. Her chest rose and fell more than usual. Everybody talked about how pretty Jackie was—and Misty thought so, too—but Shauna was probably just as pretty. So was Nat, really. Just as pretty as them. Misty had always thought she'd be prettier without all the eyeliner, though, and once they got to start living together out here she had her proof. She'd told Nat as much the other day, actually. She'd meant it as a compliment, but it'd come out wrong and Nat had stomped away from her.

"You're right, Misty." Shauna climbed to her feet. Misty smiled, but she'd been so distracted with thoughts of Natalie that it took her a second to remember what exactly she'd been right about. "I am sad. I don't wanna be… fighting with Jackie. I'm, uh, gonna go find her, yeah?" Shauna walked backwards toward the door, running a hand through her hair.

Misty positively beamed as she nodded at her, because Shauna Shipman had taken her relationship advice. She gave good advice. She was a solid problem solver. Which meant that she was going to figure out this Ben situation. She just had to keep watching him a little longer.

2005

Everything stung. Shauna was on her back with her hips wide open and a giant light shining directly on her, like her vagina was some sort of exhibit in the world's sickest museum. Jeff was by the head of the bed. A doctor and two nurses were running around the room. Her back ached and she felt like she was going to rip in half down there. They'd gotten there too late for the epidural that Shauna had so desperately wanted. It was the only fucking thing she'd asked for, and she wasn't going to get it.

"Labor doesn't usually move this quickly the first time," a peppy nurse had told her, her eyes apologetic. She looked young to Shauna—way too young to be a nurse, in her pink scrubs and shiny white tennis shoes, her dark hair pulled back in a high ponytail. But then, Shauna had been way too young for things a lot worse than being a nurse.

She'd been too young when she did this the first time—shoving the baby out with Misty acting as midwife, Akilah as nurse, and Tai as doula. She'd seen shows and movies as a kid where women went into labor—usually sitcoms, but sometimes the dramas that Jackie had loved. More than once, she'd watched the women cry out for their moms or their sisters or their best friends while they pushed. It had always seemed like a silly bit—screw my asshole husband, I want my [insert female comfort person here]. Shauna had never understood that trope. She'd thought that you ought to want the person you were having a kid with more than anyone else when you were scared or in pain.

When Shauna gave birth the first time, she got on her hands and knees before she really pushed. She felt like a feral thing. No different than the neighbor's cat giving birth in her yard when she was eight. (She and Jackie had watched in disgusted interest, until the cat had started crying scary loud and they'd run inside to get Shauna's mom.) She'd started on her back, just as she was now, but her body had screamed at her to move. Misty had tried to push her back down, Akilah had asked her why she was getting up, Tai had shoved them both aside roughly. Shauna hadn't been able to speak through most of it. She'd just gritted her jaw tight against the pain of the contractions and groaned.

She hadn't been speaking much, anyway. Not back then. But once she hit her hands and knees, she'd felt the most terrifying pressure. She'd wanted to puke, but couldn't handle the prospect of having to smell it afterwards, so she'd swallowed it down. She'd wanted to die, but she'd thought that she probably couldn't bring that about any faster, because she was pretty sure she was already staring down the barrel of mother nature's gun.

Most of all, Shauna had wanted Jackie. Badly. Badly enough to open her mouth wide and scream it, just like the women on those shows and movies had screamed.

Shauna couldn't beg for Jackie now. Jeff would be terrified and then she'd have to deal with him being all weird about it later. She wanted to, though. All those years and she still just wanted Jackie. Even ghost Jackie hadn't shown up for the occasion. Fuck, would she

have killed for a decent hallucination of her. But she hadn't come the last time, so Shauna's hopes were low.

Jeff paled, swaying on his feet. A nurse brought him a cup of water and a cool rag. A sick fucking joke, watching her idiot husband being catered to while she was the one being ripped apart. She was going to have to bear down soon. She wouldn't have an option with the next contraction. She could tell. This baby was coming and she was the only one in the room who knew that it wasn't the first time she'd done this. Shauna wished that she and Tai hadn't lost touch after the wedding, she wished that she was there with her.

Pressure.

Pressure like she was about to pop, deep inside her. She squeezed Jeff's hand tighter and opened her mouth to scream.

"I want my fucking epidural!"

Fall 1994

Brian McNathy had just asked Lottie to homecoming. She'd told him she'd think about it, even though there was nothing to think about. She would go with him and Nat would go with one of her guy friends and they'd sneak away at some point, but they wouldn't even get to dance together.

Sometimes Lottie wondered if things would be like that with Nat even if nobody cared about being gay. Like, even if she and Nat could go to homecoming together, she wasn't sure that Nat would. She was flighty and the more Lottie tried to grab ahold of her, the more distance she put between them.

They were in the locker room, waiting for practice to start. Jackie switched on the radio that Lottie had bought to leave there for them. Push It blared through the speaker. Lottie beamed. She knew exactly how all of her friends would react, even before she watched it unfold.

Jackie cranked it up higher, beckoning Shauna toward her with one hand. Shauna groaned and tipped her head back in halfhearted protest. Nat rolled her eyes and kept shuffling through her things. Tai started swaying her hips and shoulders to the beat as she finished pulling her hair up and Van watched her with a sweet smile from her spot next to Shauna.

Tai pulled Van to her feet and they danced with their hands clasped together. Jackie moved closer in her pursuit of Shauna, lifting the book right out of her hands.

"No, Jackie—Jackie, let me mark my place!" Shauna whined, her voice equal parts annoyance and endearment. (Jackie had left her finger in the pages, of course, careful not to lose Shauna's spot. Lottie rolled her eyes because why the hell didn't Shipman know that Jackie would never do that to her.)

Jackie coaxed Shauna to her feet, both hands firmly planted on her waist to force her to swing her hips to the quick beat. Shauna rested her arms on Jackie's shoulders and laughed, the grin on her face contagiously bright. They were so much more obvious than Van and Taissa but, based on how they interacted, Lottie guessed that they were way less open about

their relationship with each other. Nat didn't believe Lottie when she told her that they weren't the only ones fooling around on their team. Well, she would've, if Lottie had actually seen any of them, like, actively hooking up. But she didn't think that Lottie was right when she said anybody with two eyes and one brain cell can see those idiots are in love with each other.

Lottie snuck over to Nat, who was in a sort of shit mood and therefore pretending to be too cool for their little dance party. She slipped her arms around her waist from behind and Nat shot upright.

"Jesus! You scared me, Lot."

"Me? Scary? Never." Lottie grinned. "Can I have this dance?" She did a little curtsy, holding her baggy jersey a few inches from her body with one hand and offering Nat the other.

"God, you're such a dork," Nat chuckled.

But she was smiling that big, dimpled smile of hers and she took Lottie's hand and Lottie's heart beat a little faster and her feet felt a little lighter. She pretended that this was their homecoming. And, truth be told, everyone in the room probably wished that it was.

The bliss came to an end as quickly as it'd begun. Lottie and Shauna were the last ones left in the locker room, fussing with their cleats while the other girls ran out to the field.

"Keep up, Shipman!" Jackie yelled, jogging backwards and winking at her.

Lottie watched Shauna blush as she pulled her laces tighter.

"Do you… ever wish you could just take Jackie to homecoming?" Lottie asked quietly.

"I—I—what?" Shauna sputtered. She was so clearly scared shitless, struggling to form words. "What do you mean? I mean, we're—I'm not—she's not…" Her cheeks shifted from a sweet pink to an uncomfortable red.

"Sorry, Shauna. I just… I didn't mean to upset you. I don't know what I was thinking. Never mind."

A few days ago

"Jeff, I already told you. I don't know anything yet."

Shauna was standing outside the shitty motel, peeling away chunks of chipping navy paint from the banister that ran along the length of the building.

"I'm not talking about the weird Yellowjackets shit, Shauna," Jeff said firmly. "I'm talking about her."

"Okay, well I don't even know what you're asking me then." Shauna took a few deep breaths. She just wanted to go back inside and curl up with Jackie. One more minute. She just needed to give him one more minute of her time. Control this. End this call. And then she could go inside and lay down next to living, breathing Jackie Taylor.

"I'm asking you if you're running away with your—your fucking ex-girlfriend, right now. Our ex-girlfriend, if you wanna get technical about it."

I wish.

"I'm not running away with anyone. I'm with her right now, yeah. I—she—fuck, we're just talking, okay? We haven't seen each other in so long and I'm in fucking shock right now!"

"But you're in love with her? Still in love with her. Always in love with her. Am I right? That's all I've heard about for our entire goddamn marriage, Shauna. Even when you didn't say it out loud, you made it perfectly fucking clear that she's the real love of your life. So don't act like I'm an idiot for asking about this. You're my wife. I have a right to know."

"I can't answer you because I don't have a fucking answer for you!" Shauna snapped. 'I don't know what's going on. I feel like… like I'm losing my mind and I'm just… going along for the ride right now.' She was crying again, but she didn't think he would hear it in her voice. He'd never been good at picking up on that sort of nuance, no matter how unsubtle. "I don't know what you want me to say. Whatever happens, I… don't you understand that I'm gonna have to get having her—here and alive—and just—just enjoying this out of my system, before I do anything else?"

A few hours ago

"I'm so fucking stupid," Jackie sobbed, one hand pressed to her forehead, the other clutching the coffee Nat had gotten for her. It was hot—Jackie hadn't even thought to specify that she wanted an iced americano, because ordering hot coffee wasn't a thing that occurred to her. They sat in Nat's car. She'd told Jackie that sobbing in a public place would probably draw some unwanted attention and they had that in spades already.

Nat sighed, setting her flimsy paper cup down in the cupholder. "What did she say, Jackie? What exactly did she say to get you like… this?" Her lips pulled downward to form an exaggerated frown.

Jackie couldn't tell if Nat was going to try and excuse Shauna's behavior or if she was just trying to get Jackie to open up. Probably the latter, because Nat didn't seem to be Shauna's biggest fan. None of them did, really. Maybe Tai, but that was it.

Fuck.

Jackie was sitting there, sobbing over Shauna, feeling like an idiot because of Shauna, and yet… mostly she was worrying about Shauna. Wondering if she shouldn't have left her with Jeff, because he seemed to be out to hurt her right now. But, no, hadn't Tai been there when Jackie had left? Not alone. Better.

That wasn't her only concern, though. Jackie knew that if Shauna truly did care about her as much as she thought she did, she'd be sick to her stomach at Jackie walking away from an argument like that. Jackie really hadn't wanted to. She'd been hanging in there, but Jeff's last fucking bombshell had been too much. She needed space, because if she stayed there and watched Shauna cry, Jackie would be in her lap, wiping her tears, begging her to just promise

that she didn't mean it, so that they could move the fuck on. She'd make excuses for Shauna until she could slot herself right back into her arms, because that's all she fucking wanted. Almost twenty-five years without her and Jackie just wanted her.

Jackie hiccupped. "She didn't… Jeff said—"

"That motherfucking himbo!" Nat snapped, smacking the console. Her coffee jumped a little, a few drops sliding down the side of her cup. "Listen, I don't like Shauna very much. Let's just say I don't think she's a… healthy person. But I know she loves you and I know you love her and its just really some simple fucking math. So watching that man get in between you two, still, is so goddamn annoying, Jackie."

Jackie laughed a little, wiping her nose with her sleeve. She felt disgusting, sinuses plugged and throat full. "I agree, but I'm not the one who married the guy."

"True," Nat mumbled, nodding with her whole body. "What did the idiot say, huh?"

"He told me that… that Shauna said she was just—" Jackie raised her fingers in air quotes, "getting me out of her system."

Nat narrowed her eyes and stayed silent for a moment. "Sadecki said that?"

"Yeah."

"And what did Shauna say?"

"She said that he was twisting her words and she told me she could explain and then… pretty much you saw the rest."

"Hmmm," Nat hummed. "Well, I'm not trying to send you running back into her arms or anything. But… the two of you are gonna end up there anyway and I'd rather you spend less time torturing yourself. Shauna's a fucking liar, dude."

"I—" Jackie started. She tilted her head at Nat, blinking rapidly to try and make sense of her. "I mean, what—so, you're saying what?"

Nat chuckled and put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm saying that your woman is a self-destructive, compulsive liar. If you aren't down with that, I suggest you go back in time like… thirty-five years or whatever the fuck it is and un-meet her. Other than that, you gotta look at the big picture when she says stupid shit. She lied to Jeff because it was easier. Was it right? Fuck no. But that bitch hardly ever gets it right."

"Okay, but…" Jackie pulled her feet up so that she could cross her legs underneath herself. "How do I know it isn't me she's lying to?"

"Oh God, because I'm not a fucking liar and I can tell you without a doubt that woman couldn't get you out of her system with a fucking colonic," Nat said, with an exaggerated roll of her eyes. "You, like, are her system. She's all systems set to Jackie fucking Taylor, all the time. I'm not trying to excuse her. She's a crazy bitch. I'm not saying she won't hurt you."

Jackie knew that she would. But she knew that she'd hurt Shauna, too. That they were both prone to hurting each other and that these circumstances were beyond extreme. She just didn't fucking care anymore. She was done trying to avoid it.

“But if you’re scared of her leaving you or choosing fuckface Sadecki over you? Then you’re out of your fucking mind. When we… lost you, Jackie… she went hysterical. I’ve never seen anything else like it. If I were you, I’d be more worried about her, like, holding you hostage or some shit.”

Guilt was pouring through Jackie fast. She could see it in her mind’s eye—hot liquid remorse, filling her body from the bottom up until it spilled out the top. She’d let Shauna go through something unimaginable.

Jackie had thought that Shauna was dying once. And she’d listened to the ramblings of a madwoman, cutting into her own flesh so deep that her skin started to curl forward, begging Van to finish it when her hands shook too much from the pain, bullying her into it with fervor that she hadn’t known she possessed. She’d done all of that, just in case it might save Shauna.

Jackie needed to go back to their fucking hotel room.

11. hinted at it

"Do you have a Xanax or something?"

Shauna looked at Jeff expectantly. Defeated. Back where she'd begun, with Jeff in front of her and Callie sitting on the loveseat. Except this time, Tai was perched uncomfortably next to Callie, her legs crossed at the ankle, like she was ready for a stray campaign reporter to pop out of the bathroom and snap a photo of her at any second.

It'd taken Taissa and Callie a while to calm Shauna enough to herd her back into the room. Her head thudded with the pressure of her tears, her throat was scratchy from yelling, her chest was a gnawing hollow space. Jeff had pretty much ignored Shauna once he'd seen her reaction to Jackie's departure. He usually tried to hold Shauna together when she was falling apart—the same as Jackie—so the silent treatment he'd met her with was fucking jarring.

"No," Jeff grumbled. "You never refilled your script last month."

Shauna swore under her breath.

"You guys have issues," Callie muttered. Neither of them looked toward her.

"Are you coming home with us?" Jeff demanded. "Because if not, I don't see the point in us hanging around."

"I can't just come home with you," Shauna snapped. Raising her voice sent a sharp, stabbing pain through her throat. She clutched it, feeling it bob as she swallowed hard. "Don't you get that it isn't that simple?"

"It should be, though." Jeff sighed, running a hand through his hair. "It should be that simple."

They'd both calmed down significantly. Jeff wasn't red in the face, Shauna wasn't frantically sobbing. Jackie had been the powder keg in their fight, the thing between them, just as she'd always been. And now that she was gone, they were just sort of… fizzling out.

"If you don't mind me saying," Tai interjected, interlacing her fingers atop her knee and flashing Jeff a cautious, sympathetic smile, 'it really isn't. I'm not going to pretend to know what's going on with the… personal issues,' she glanced at Shauna, "but logistically, none of us can just bail at the moment. Trust me, we'd all like to."

Jeff nodded slowly, sucking air through his teeth. "Right, well. I guess we'll just wait to hear from you then. You can't tell us what's going on, you can't come home. I don't know what else to do with you, Shauna." He sighed sharply, his breath quick and loud. "Cal, you ready to go?"

"Just like that?" Callie snapped, sitting up straight. "I mean… Dad, you wanna just leave already?"

"Callie—" Shauna started, forcing her tone gentle.

“Can I have a minute alone with my mom?” Callie asked suddenly, looking at Tai.

Tai glanced at Shauna. Shauna nodded. Tai made her way across the room, pushing past Jeff a little rougher than she needed to. “I’ll be right outside,” she called over her shoulder.

“Um,” Callie stared at Jeff with the same insistent look Shauna had given him moments ago. “I meant you too, Dad.”

“Fuck,” Jeff muttered under his breath. “Ten minutes.”

As Jeff shut the door behind himself, Shauna took a seat next to Callie on the loveseat. She was weary, unsure why Callie wanted to do this, whatever this was. But mostly Shauna was anxious. Not about Jeff or Callie—Jackie eclipsed them almost entirely. Jackie, who wasn’t there, taking hold of Shauna so tightly that she couldn’t properly deal with her husband and child, who were there. Something about the familiarity of it kept Shauna from spiraling out.

“So, I grilled your friends,” Callie said, matter-of-fact.

“Yeah?” Shauna asked, brow raised. “And what did you get from that?”

“Nothing, really. Except that I cannot tell anyone you were all here together or that Jackie is alive or Nat will, like, make my life hell.” Callie took a light tone, poking fun. Shauna chuckled, even though she knew that Nat had been far from kidding. “And… some basics about the two of you. About you and Jackie. Super vague but, between what they said and you and dad screaming at each other like idiots, it’s enough for me to… get the picture.”

“Hmmm,” Shauna hummed. She kept her lips sealed, couldn’t risk opening her mouth and spilling more than Callie already knew.

“Mom…” Callie grinned, her voice and her eyes lightening, “she’s like, a total smokeshow. I seriously don’t understand how you pull like this.”

Shauna tilted her head to the side and twisted her features in mock offense. “Gee, thanks, Cal.”

Callie’s face fell as quickly as it’d brightened. “I am sorry, Mom. Like, I’m so sorry you went through all this shit. I didn’t know that you…” Callie paused, looking down at her hands before meeting Shauna’s eyes again. “You actually loved her, right? As in… you two were together? Even back then?”

Shauna took a deep breath, exhaling through pursed lips as she tipped her head all the way back for a moment. “Yeah.” Shauna gave Callie a small smile. “We were together. Or… as together as we felt like we could be. It was complicated. It wasn’t a time where you could be…” she shrugged, “really in a relationship like that. Two girls.” She shifted her focus to her lap and shook her head.

“That fucking sucks,” Callie muttered quietly.

“It did suck.” Shauna laughed a bit under her breath. “It really did.”

“But… she was dating Dad?” Callie asked carefully. She knew the answer to that. She’d always known. The pieces she hadn’t known were when Jeff and Shauna had started things and what Jackie and Shauna had been to each other.

Shauna sighed. “Yep.”

“And you were… like, his side piece? Or what?”

Shauna felt herself start to anger at the term, pain creeping in behind her eyes, but she managed to pause. To wrangle herself and tone it down. Because really, what else could she call it? “I mean, yeah,” she conceded. “That’s pretty much it.”

Callie angled herself closer to Shauna. Shauna mirrored her movement, hoping against hope that she wouldn’t have to come up with any further explanation on the dynamics between the three of them, because she’d lived it and she still wasn’t really clear on all of it.

“Did you ever love him?” Callie asked simply. She didn’t look judgmental. She seemed shockingly open, like she’d accept any answer just the same.

Shauna blinked at her for a moment, trying to figure out what the honest answer to this question even was. “I have at times, I think.”

Callie nodded. “But, you know you love her? You still love her, right?” She twisted her sleeve between her thumb and pointer finger.

“Yeah, honey,” Shauna said quietly. “I know I love her.”

“Does she love you back?” Callie sounded young, just then—they way she asked that question. Like when she was a little girl, asking Shauna about the characters in the bedtime stories that she sometimes made up for her. The ones that she told her on her good days.

“She does,” Shauna whispered, searching Callie’s face for a reaction.

Or she did, Shauna thought, before she could push the fear away. Focus. One thing at a time. Jackie had promised that she’d be back and Jackie wasn’t the type to break a promise and Nat had her and Nat wouldn’t let her go off by herself while the world crumbled around them and Shauna would have a chance to beg. So she needed to just fucking focus.

“You used to… talk to her, didn’t you?” Callie asked, eyes a little wider and voice a little quieter than usual. Shauna flinched. She hadn’t thought that Callie remembered that, but of course she did. Why wouldn’t she remember her mother talking to no one? “When you thought she was dead? Your imaginary friend.”

“Yeah,” Shauna confirmed, cheeks warm with embarrassment. There was nothing quite like being confronted with the fact that your daughter knows how insane you are, that she’s always known.

“Mom, this is like… next level tragic.” Callie’s eyes were glassy, but her lips curled up just slightly.

“I’m so aware of that, Cals.” Shauna ruffled her hair, her fingers raking against her scalp. She never got away with that anymore. Not that she had the urge to try very often, but when she did Callie always swatted her away. Which, oops, Callie did just then, too—sympathy be damned.

“You two have been in love this whole time, but you couldn’t ever just be together and you’re all old now,” Callie joked. Payback for her hair. ‘That’s tragic.’ Shauna rolled her eyes and scoffed. “So… way back then it was homophobes, then it was this weird Jackie had to

fake her death thing that no one will explain to me, by the way, and now—" Callie cut herself off, frowning.

"Now Dad," Shauna finished for her.

"I wanna stay with you," Callie said quickly, the words were pressurized. "Well… you and Jackie, I guess."

"I—you—what?" Shauna sputtered.

"I love Dad, but… it's you that's always been there. It's weird, not having you around. He's like… sort of useless. And I figured you're not coming home right now. Or… maybe ever? At least, not with Dad?" Callie rambled without pausing to catch her breath. "God, that's weird. I'm as good as a child of divorce already. Not that you weren't already basically —"

"Callie, honey," Shauna rested a hand on her shoulder to halt her. "Slow down. You can't stay with me. Not here. Not right now."

"What, because you wanna run away with your new girlfriend? You just don't want me anymore?" Callie snapped. A true teenage girl mood-swing—cycling from sarcastic to sympathetic to joking to crying in minutes. "You're my fucking mom, you're supposed to love me."

(Shauna had the same cycle, really. She'd never outgrown it, if she was being honest with herself.)

"Callie—" she shook her head.

"No! Dad said you weren't coming home if we didn't bring you back," Callie sobbed.

Shauna hadn't seen her cry like this in years. She never would've considered that Callie might cry like this about her. She was so clearly terrified. It was a perfect storm of revelations and danger and being stuck with her idiot father, without Shauna there to do her laundry or cook her dinner or laugh at his dumb jokes so that she didn't have to. It felt good to have Callie emotional over her like this.

"So… so that's fine, I don't care," Callie said stubbornly, staunching her tears and wiping her eyes. "I hate stupid fucking Wiskayok, anyway. But you can't just—you can't just leave me, Mom. It's like, child abandonment or something."

"Well, it's not really child abandonment if your father's still there."

"Mom!"

"Okay, okay. Sorry." Shauna pulled Callie into a hug that she didn't return. She rubbed her back until her breathing slowed and her cries quieted. When Callie worked herself up like this, she couldn't hear anything anyone was saying to her. Shauna knew, because she was the same fucking way. Like mother, like daughter. "Cals, I'm not leaving you. I promise you, sweetie. I'm your mom. I love you. I'm not running away from you."

Callie hugged her back. It was weak, but it was something.

“Bad things are happening right now that I can’t explain,” Shauna said quietly. ‘And I need you to be safe. That means you need to go with Dad.’ Callie tensed up. “For now,” Shauna added, rubbing her back harder, in big circles like she had when Callie was a toddler and refused to calm down. “I’m gonna deal with this stuff as quickly as I can, and then I’ll come get you, okay? No matter what happens with me and your Dad, I’ll be there with you.”

Shauna couldn’t believe the relief she felt with her daughter sobbing in her arms, because it brought her a moment of clarity—the realization that there was some truth to the words that she was saying. (A little nagging part of her clung, though, to the fact that she couldn’t say I love you more than anything. She couldn’t add that last bit, even though it felt like the natural end to the thought. Shauna just couldn’t do it.)

Better than nothing.

“Sooo, are we gonna talk about any of that?” Tai asked, pitching sideways to gently bump Shauna’s shoulder with her own. “Or are we ignoring it?”

Shauna and Tai were sitting on the floor, leaning back against the foot of the bed. They’d been silent for a long time. Callie and Jeff were on their way home. Tai had thought that it was safe enough for them to return to their usual lives, now that Shauna wasn’t there, and Shauna hadn’t been able to think at all. She promised herself she would call Callie every single day from now on. She’d check in so much that Callie would find it annoying, beg her to knock it off. Shauna, as per fucking usual, desperately needed to be better.

Shauna sipped on the coffee Tai had brought her from the cafe downstairs. It’d gone lukewarm with time. Bitter. “God, Tai.” She shook her head. “I don’t even know how to talk about any of that. I’m so… fucking out of it right now.”

Tai nodded, then a glimmer of a smirk played on her pretty features.

“What?” Shauna narrowed her eyes, her lips forming the ghost of a smile.

“Well, if you don’t want to talk… I kissed Van last night. So I was thinking… maybe you could start being less of a bitch to her.” She said it quickly, just as she might’ve when they were sixteen. Blurting it like a secret she’d been dying to giggle about all day. She looked genuinely happy, her eyes bright and focused. It was almost startling.

Shauna grinned at her. “Oh my God, did you really?” Tai laughed and nodded and Shauna chuckled with her. Tai was the only person on the planet who could make her laugh while she agonized over Jackie taking off. “Okay, so…” Shauna nudged Tai’s leg with her knee, “are you two under some spell too, then?”

Tai rolled her eyes and looked away. “We are so not the same as you and Jackie.”

“Oh, alright, sure you’re not,” Shauna quipped sarcastically. She braced herself for the backlash. “I promise to try and be less of a bitch. But… are you sure this is a good idea?”

The backlash she’d been expecting came in the form of the most incredulous look she’d ever seen on Taissa’s face.

“The queen of bad ideas asking me about my love life?”

“Well, yeah,” Shauna shrugged. “I think you should take it more seriously coming from me, honestly. If I’m asking—”

Tai cut her off with a gentle shove.

“Ouch!” Shauna yelped without thinking.

Tai raised her eyebrows. “Ouch what? If that actually hurt, you’re in trouble.”

“No, just—I think I pulled my shoulder or something. It’s fine, I’ve been taking painkillers. Jackie—” Shauna felt tears prick the back of her eyes. She cleared her throat. “Jackie got me some lotion for it, that’s helping.”

“Hmm.” Tai surveyed Shauna’s face. She opened her mouth, but a quiet knock at the door interrupted her.

Jackie.

Shauna’s heart thudded quicker. She set her coffee aside, scrambling to her feet and rushing across the room. She threw the door open to…

Not Jackie.

Another redhead—fairer skin, more freckles, lighter hair. Van, giving her a weak smile that was almost a grimace.

“Hey, uh, is—” she started, peering around Shauna and letting out a relieved exhale when she saw Taissa climbing to her feet. ‘Hey,’ she repeated, a true smile on her face, her eyes on Tai. “Did you still wanna…?”

“Yes!” Tai said quickly. ‘Yeah, I—wait,’ she turned to Shauna, “are you gonna be okay for a few hours? I forgot to mention—clearly the noon meeting didn’t, uh, pan out. We pushed it back until this evening. So… Van and I were gonna go, um, catch up for a while before then. But if you need me to stay—”

Van bounced on her heels, her gaze flitting between Taissa and Shauna.

“No, go ahead. Seriously, I’m fine,” Shauna insisted. “I was gonna take a bath anyway. Sore back and everything.”

“Okay, great.” Tai shifted focus, staring at Van intently. ‘So, I need to go change. And Shauna, I have some muscle relaxants I can bring you. For the shoulder.’ She sounded nervous, clearly trying to pull something off. “Van, would you want to just… hang out here for a minute, while I go do that?”

Van gaped at her—wide-eyed, incredulous.

“Oh—” Shauna started to protest, but Tai was already pushing past both of them towards the door.

“I’ll be right back!” Taissa called as she let the door slam shut behind her.

Fuck.

Taissa wanted Shauna to apologize. Her little song and dance to get them alone together had been so thinly veiled it might as well have been sheer. Tai trusted her not to start shit,

though, which was… decent progress. All these apologies. Awkward, disjointed, unusual for Shauna. She didn't know how to start it. With Lottie it'd been easy—there'd been no shifty preamble or clear expectation. Plus—as far as Shauna knew and God, she hoped she was correct—Lottie had never had sex with Jackie, so try as she might to group Van and Lottie together as far as transgressions went, there was always a part of Shauna that would be—

"Shauna," Van said firmly, waving a hand in front of her face. Shauna blinked at her, refocusing. "Right, I'm gonna say some shit to you that you probably won't like hearing, but I want you to shut up and listen. Consider it your apology for smashing my fucking nose in, yeah? Clearly that's what Tai was angling at, but I really don't need whatever half-assed sorry you'd come up with."

Van didn't sound pissed—she actually had a bit of a lilt to her voice. Shauna hadn't heard this tone in a long time, but she knew it well. Van was getting ready to monologue.

"Um… okay." Shauna shrugged and nodded to prompt Van to go on.

"Great." Van flashed a small smile. Her eyes lit up a little and she almost looked like her old self, if Shauna caught her in the proper light. "Okay, man, I don't know what the fuck you did, but Jackie is not okay—"

"I—"

Van held up a finger to silence her. "And I need you to fix it, because it's pissing Tai off and we're… I don't even know, doing the same dumb shit you guys are right now, I guess? Except for some reason you're remarkably more okay with Jackie and I." She ran a hand through her hair, draping the silky sheet of red over one shoulder absentmindedly. "I don't think Jackie should be with you. I've told her that, I've told you that. But she's gonna do what she's gonna do, so I'm gonna give you my advice on fixing this, whether you want it or not. Because it's impossible to make anyone happy when Jackie runs in crying and Tai rips my head off about it and fuck, Shauna. This shit is weird enough already, y'know?"

"Uh, yeah." Shauna cleared her throat. "Yeah, I know what you mean, but—"

"Things might be different this time, because this fight seemed… severe. So it might not apply right this second, but it will, eventually. So pay attention." Van spoke fluidly, watching Shauna's face for comprehension. "You touch her when she's mad and she'll rip your goddamn head off. Doesn't even have to be you she's mad at. Just give her a wide berth, look sad, keep your head down like a dog that's pissed on the carpet. She'll come to you when she's ready."

Van paused, eyes fixed on Shauna's. Shauna nodded, dazed. She'd fallen into some backwards motherfucking dimension, where Van fucking Palmer was giving her advice on how to handle an angry Jackie Taylor. Nothing made sense and everything was twisted, but it gave Shauna a strange confidence that all of this was real, because no maladaptive daydream or psychotic delusion that came from the depths of Shauna's mind ever could've come up with something this left fucking field.

Van took a deep breath. "The trick is, the second she touches you—I'm talking any intentional touch no matter how small, because the madder she is the smaller it'll be—elbow against your arm, pinky brushes your hand, whatever—it's go time and you've got a tiny

window to be physically affectionate immediately. Reserved, of course. Don't go trying to kiss her, even if she's giving you that face. It's a trap. Don't fall for it."

Jesus fucking Christ. Van really knew her. She really had been around her all these years. She'd truly gotten to date Jackie and fuck her and be her friend and watch her age and Shauna was back to wanting to wring her fucking neck for it.

Van was still talking. "Put your arm around her, play with her hair, rub her back, whatever. Pick something sweet and just keep doing it. There's gonna be a long pause where she freezes and it's gonna scare the shit out of you, but once you're to this part the only way out is through. So don't chicken out or you'll have to start all over. Eventually she'll start talking and you've got your foot back in the door."

Shauna blinked at her for a few seconds. Van waited.

"I… hate this," Shauna said simply.

"Yeah, well, I gotta tell you I hate this, too. But I love her and she loves you, so here we are," Van answered swiftly. But she smiled at Shauna like she meant it. She looked, for a brief moment, like the Van who Shauna had loved all those years ago. The Van who could take any uncomfortable situation and joke about it or smooth talk through it until everyone relaxed.

"Love her, huh?" Shauna quipped.

"Not like that. Jesus Christ. It's been twenty years. We're friends, Shauna. I know how she gets because, yeah, I've been there before." Shauna shuddered a little. Van rolled her eyes. "But also because I've been around for every girlfriend or fling or whatever that she's had."

Shauna felt another pang of jealousy—not about their relationship, but about the easy way Van said that she'd been there. She'd been with Jackie. This entire time.

Three quick knocks on the door.

Van opened it this time. "Ready?" she asked, flashing Tai a cautious smile.

"Yeah. Here, Shauna." Tai handed her a prescription bottle with a few pills in it. "Not a ton left, but I'm sure they'll help. Everything good?" She looked between the two of them.

"Just peachy," Van said, grabbing her elbow and leading her back out the door. "Can we go now?"

"We're good Tai." Shauna popped the bottle open. "See you soon."

"Call me, Shauna. If you need me." Tai flashed her a concerned look, just before the door swung shut behind them.

Shauna truly had just wanted a bath.

She'd drawn it right after Tai and Van had left, with water hot enough to stain her skin bright red. Steam coated the mirror and filled the room. She'd been laying there for at least half an hour, reveling in the fact that she was in a hotel, meaning that she had access to a never ending supply of hot water and there would be no utility bill coming for her indulgence.

She let the tap drain a little every five minutes or so, topping it off with more scorching hot water. She'd done a remarkable job clearing her mind. She was good at that when she wanted to be. Sometimes even when she didn't want to be.

She thought about getting out, peering over the ledge of the tub to see if there were any towels nearby. There weren't. There was, however, a very teenage, very solid-looking Jackie. Perched on the counter, her skinny legs swinging back and forth, and staring back at Shauna.

"Fuck!" Shauna yelped, jumping. She squeezed her eyes shut so hard it hurt, opening them again to—

Thank God.

An empty bathroom.

The relief was only momentary. The fact that she could still see that Jackie at all was fucking terrifying. It didn't really matter how brief it was. Her mind was still fractured. Part of her brain hadn't grasped the permanence of it over the past few days—that Jackie was alive and had been this entire fucking time.

Shauna sunk down, submerging her head below the water, and held her breath. The heat made the fragile skin around her eyes burn. Her hair started to float up around her, the pins Jackie had fixed in it clinging on and keeping it out of her face. Her chest ached sharply. She pushed longer, ignoring her body's pleas for oxygen, until someone yanked her out by the shoulders. She gasped, spluttering at the water that'd gotten in her nose and mouth in her shock, and scanned the room for the intruder.

Misty fucking Quigley.

She was standing over Shauna, her eyes wide beneath her foggy glasses.

"What the fuck, Misty?" Shauna screeched, automatically crossing her arms over her chest. Water sloshed over the side of the tub as she scrambled to sit upright. "How'd you even get in here?"

"I snagged an extra key for all our rooms, just in case," Misty answered with a shrug. "Were you trying to drown yourself?" She tilted her head to the side—calm curiosity.

"What? No—fuck!" Shauna snapped, pulling her knees up to her chest to try and cover herself. "Why the hell are you in here? Get out!"

"Oh, right!" Misty's posture shifted. She stood up straighter and squared her shoulders, like she'd just remembered something important. "We need you. Now. It's Jackie."

"What?" Shauna demanded, her pulse racing, her heartbeat loud in her ears. "What's wrong?"

"She's okay. For now. She's sort of fighting Lottie and it's getting ugly."

What the fuck?

"Turn around," Shauna spat quickly. Misty did, but she faced the mirror, her eyes still open. "Jesus, fuck. Just get out, Misty! I'm coming."

Barefoot, tee shirt and sweat shorts thrown haphazardly over wet skin, fabric clinging in spots she'd really rather it didn't, hair dripping onto the ugly carpet. That's how Shauna scurried the short distance down the hall to their room, with Misty trailing behind her like she was herding her. As if Shauna wasn't hellbent on getting there as quickly as she could of her own volition.

She didn't hear their voices until she was just outside the door—mixed yells, maybe crying? She had a brief moment of sheer fucking relief regarding the surprisingly adequate sound proofing of this hotel. Maybe they were less fucked than she'd thought on that front. Misty pushed her aside to unlock the door with her key, holding it open for Shauna to go first.

A really fucking trashy tableau. That was Shauna's first thought. Something a college art student might throw together to carry old style into modern times, or whatever (she tried not to let that remind her of the mess she'd made with Adam).

Lottie was on the ground. Her body was perpendicular to Shauna's spot at the door, so she could see the whole scene perfectly. She was laid on her back, one arm pinned above her head by Jackie, who sat up on her knees, straddling Lottie's stomach. Lottie's other arm was extended straight out, her elbow locked and her long fingers shoving Jackie's head up and away, with a hand just under her jaw.

Jackie's right hand was wound through Lottie's long hair, enough of it clenched in her fist that she'd almost made a ponytail high on her head. She was using it to slam Lottie back to the ground whenever she tried to lift her upper body.

Nat stood behind Jackie, her legs straight—hovering over Lottie as well, bent at the waist to reach Jackie from a distance. Her right arm was hooked under Jackie's armpit. Her left hand was held in front of her, palm flat and hovering about six inches behind Jackie's elbow, guarding it. Her face was turned down and to the left. It wasn't a position that she could feasibly pull Jackie up from, though that seemed to be the goal.

Shauna could immediately tell why Nat was taking such an ineffective stance. The shoulder lock she had on Jackie wasn't slowing her down. She was pitching herself forward and sideways, trying to wriggle out of Lottie's grip, without much impediment from Nat. Her elbow rocketed back a few times, dragging Lottie's whole arm up with her. There was blood coming from Lottie's wrist—three streaks flowing from the skin beneath Jackie's nails, trails both above and below the punctures, the constant motion of Jackie swinging her arm up and down causing the streams to switch directions as they tried to flow with gravity.

There was no telling how long they'd been in this stalemate.

Blood streamed down Lottie's face. She was crying, but her expression was one of shock more than anything else. Shauna didn't think that she was trying to hurt Jackie. It was clear she was defending herself, but watching her fingers dig into the skin beneath Jackie's jaw—the threat of them closing around Jackie's throat—made Shauna feel just a little more insane than usual. Like she would kill her, and Nat if she had to, just to prevent any damage to Jackie, regardless of the fact that Jackie was clearly the problem right now.

"Shauna!" Nat yelled, dodging Jackie's elbow. "A little help here!"

Oh shit.

Shauna rushed to the pile of women, looking for an entry point into the mess. “I really don’t think that I’m her favorite person right now!”

Jackie wasn’t listening to her. She was too busy screaming at Lottie. It wasn’t clear if she’d even noticed Shauna’s sudden presence in the room.

“You stupid—” Jackie screamed. Lottie tossed her head up and to the side to try and break free. “—lying cunt!” Jackie slammed Lottie’s head back down hard. Shauna heard her skull thunk against the floor. Nat winced at the sound. “You had years, Lottie! Years where you weren’t sipping the fucking crazy juice! You could’ve told me!”

Jackie took a break from yelling to gasp for air. It sounded strained—Lottie’s fingers had slipped down a little lower.

“Oh, I really think you are her favorite person,” Nat snapped at Shauna. “I think that’s exactly why she’s going fucking MMA on Lot’s ass right now!”

Shauna dropped to her knees at Jackie’s side. She pressed a hand to Jackie’s chest, reaching underneath the arm holding Lottie’s, so that they were tangled together.

“Jackie.” Shauna kept her tone as soft as she could, while maintaining a hope of being heard. Jackie didn’t even glance at her. She had a deep scratch above her eyebrow. The blood had started trickling down near her eye and Shauna heard her wheeze as Lottie’s fingers tightened and fuck—she couldn’t watch this anymore. ‘Jackie!’ Shauna screamed. “Jackie, I need you to let go. Let go of her, okay?”

“You don’t understand,” Jackie sobbed, “you don’t know what she—she—” she broke off into a howling cry and let her voice fade out.

She hadn’t loosened her grip on Lottie. Her nails slid along Lottie’s wrist as she tugged it back particularly hard. The gashes went deeper, blood obscuring the extent of the damage. Lottie yelped.

“Shauna,” Nat growled—her warning tone. Shauna knew it well.

“Okay, you’re right. You’re right, baby.” Shauna prayed that the term of endearment wouldn’t piss Jackie off even more. She didn’t know where they stood, it’d just slipped out. Jackie didn’t react to it at all, but Nat scoffed loudly and Shauna swore that she heard Misty say aw, all sickly sweet. ‘You can tell me, okay? You can make me understand,’ Shauna added earnestly. “Please, just—let go, Jax. We’ll figure this out, but you need to let go.”

Everyone was shouting—Lottie was saying something that Shauna couldn’t make out, Nat’s patience was wearing thin, and Misty was trying to offer some advice that Shauna couldn’t understand. She repositioned herself and pried Jackie’s hand out of Lottie’s hair, gripping her fingers tightly with her own, then she slammed her arm down on the one that Lottie was using to grip Jackie’s throat, hard enough to break the contact.

“Nat!” she yelled. But Nat was already on board, readjusting her grip on Jackie and throwing them both backwards. Shauna released Jackie as she and Nat stumbled away. Jackie still had Lottie’s arm in a tight hold, dragging her up to a sitting position. Shauna shoved her down by the shoulders, breaking Jackie’s grip. As soon as she could, Shauna let go of Lottie and gave her a weak apology. Lottie just laid on the ground—perfectly flat, eyes shut, face

relaxed. If she hadn't been bloodied and disheveled, she might've looked like she was meditating.

(As if Shauna hadn't seen her meditate looking exactly like that.)

"Shauna!"

Jackie was close to breaking out of Nat's hold, throwing her weight forward. Shauna dropped to her knees in front of her. Jackie was sobbing—hot, angry tears spilling down her pink cheeks. They mixed with the blood, diluting it, allowing it to drip faster.

Shauna felt herself start to cry as she took Jackie's face in her hands. "Jax? Jackie, I need you, okay?" Shauna swiped the blood away and forced eye contact. Jackie's pupils were dilated uncharacteristically, black obscuring far too much hazel. "I need you to stop fighting and I need you to tell me what's going on and I just—I just need you."

Jackie stopped struggling.

"I've got her, Nat," Shauna promised.

"Are you absolutely fucking sure about that, Shipman?" Nat snapped.

"I'm sure."

Nat released Jackie, running to Lottie's side. She called for Misty, who hesitated before joining her which was… odd. Misty loved to be the hero. Shauna would wonder about that later though, because Jackie lunged forward suddenly.

Shauna caught her around the waist, the momentum causing them to tip back. Jackie landed on top of her. Shauna squeezed her hard and rolled over, pinning her to the ground with her body weight. She cried harder and used one hand to hold Jackie's cheek again, rubbing at it with her thumb. Jackie's eyes were screwed shut and she was still shaking with anger and what the fuck was going on?

There were countless reasons for Shauna to feel as though everything had changed. Jackie being alive, being here, obviously. The confidence that Jackie had in certain areas. The toughness. The openness. But staring down at Jackie so full of unbridled rage, crying as she stroked Jackie's cheek, experiencing such desperation for Jackie to calm down and tell her what was going on—that was an absolute shock to Shauna's system. Jackie was the one who held Shauna back. Jackie would calm her down when she went off the rails, convince her not to get into fights, distract her with her touch. This was so fucking backwards.

The door swung open. Van and Tai paused on the threshold, dumbfounded.

"Don't just stand there with the door open," Misty said sharply. "In or out!"

She was crouched over Lottie, dumping some liquid over her arm that must've burned, based on the way that Lottie screwed her face up. Nat had one hand on Lottie's forehead, sort of wiping at the blood there, but mostly just running her thumb back and forth across her skin. Misty was watching them instead of what she was doing.

The door closed loudly. Shauna sat up a bit to look back at Tai and Van. Jackie took advantage of the movement, slipping out from beneath Shauna and jumping to her feet in seconds. There was no rational fucking explanation for how the hell she moved like that.

Shauna clambered up, her shoulder stinging. Jackie hadn't gone for Lottie, who Nat was effectively shielding with her body, but Shauna held one of her wrists in a firm grasp—just in case.

"Van!" Jackie spat. "How could you?" Tears streamed down her splotchy cheeks. A dangerous sort of anger flashed in her eyes. Betrayal and pain and what the fuck was going on?

"What?" Van asked, her forehead creased with worry and confusion. "Jack, what're you talking about?" She took a careful step towards Jackie, one hand reaching out in an offer of touch.

"You—you—" Jackie sobbed angrily, her entire body shaking.

Shauna had only ever seen Jackie this angry when it was directed at herself. Van looked fucking petrified.

Nat forced Lottie into a sitting position against the wall and stood slowly, inching toward the fray. "I didn't realize that you guys lied to her about Shauna's mental fucking breakdown after she died," she explained angrily, throwing air quotes up around the word died. "I assumed she knew, but apparently not. I should've known nobody has the decency to tell a girl the truth around here."

Oh.

Oh shit.

"Jackie, I—I—didn't know how to—" Van took another step towards Jackie.

Big mistake.

"Don't fucking talk to me!" Jackie cried. She pressed her free hand to her stomach, pitching forward like she was about to be physically ill. "Don't say my name. Don't… don't look at me. Just leave me the fuck alone!"

"She gets leave me alone, I get go to hell you stupid yuppie cunt," Lottie muttered under her breath.

Nat nudged her with a foot, staring down at her in disbelief. Misty chuckled under her breath.

"I felt awful… when it first happened." Tears collected in Van's eyes, her lips twisted in a grimace. "I—I tried to hint at it, but—"

"Oh!" Jackie gave a caustic laugh. Her eyes were wild with anger and hurt, not unlike the look she'd given Misty the night before. "You tried to hint at it?"

She lunged to her side suddenly. Shauna tightened her grip on her wrist, but she managed to snag a glass off of the coffee table with her free hand.

"You hinted—" Jackie screamed, throwing the glass directly at Van. The liquid flew out, streaking a trail of blood red juice through the air. "—at it!" Van ducked just in time. The glass hit the wall behind her, shattering. 'Well, fuck me then!' Jackie screeched. "This is my bad, if you hinted at it!"

Van kept her head bowed, a shaky hand pressed over her eyes.

Tai stepped in front of her. “Listen, Jackie. I get that you’re pissed. But if you keep acting like this, you and I are going to have a problem.”

“Ha!” Jackie snapped. “Oh, I wouldn’t want a problem with Taissa fucking Turner. God forbid. I’ll just run away with my tail between my legs, how’s that work for you?”

Holy shit.

“Okay, okay!” Shauna said firmly, before Taissa could speak. She threw herself in front of Jackie, blocking her view of Tai. “We’re going!”

Shauna bent at the knees, tuning out Jackie’s yells, and slipped her arms around Jackie’s upper thighs. She stood up straight, lifting Jackie completely off of the ground. It was awkward, but manageable. Jackie’s feet hovered around Shauna’s calves and her upper body was bent forward over Shauna’s shoulder, which was on fire—angry, sharp pain shooting through her entire right side. Jackie wasn’t as thin as she’d been when they were young, but she was still relatively tiny. If Shauna hadn’t been injured, she probably could’ve slung her fully over her shoulder in a true fireman’s carry. She settled gratefully for this in-between. She’d take anything that meant getting Jackie out of that fucking room.

“Nat, get the door!” Shauna instructed. “Please.”

Shauna carefully avoided the shards of glass on the carpet as she took Jackie through the door. Jackie swore at Van and Lottie over her shoulder. Nat escorted them the short distance down the hall, using Misty’s contraband key to let them into their room. Shauna mumbled her thanks as the door swung shut behind them and carried Jackie straight to their bed.

She only had one clear memory from the morning she’d thought that Jackie had died. It wasn’t even a memory, really. It was a thought she’d had, while she’d waited for Tai to tell her that Jackie was gone. She remembered wanting things: to touch Jackie’s face, to lay beside her and hear her giggle, to hold her, to rest her head on her chest and listen to her heartbeat. In just a few short days, Shauna had done all of those things.

The only one she hadn’t was to pick her up and carry her to bed—lifting her bridal style and laughing with her about how ridiculous it was. It was almost funny, how differently this was going than she’d imagined. Because technically Shauna was carrying Jackie to bed, right now. But Jackie was bleeding and she was hysterical and she was thrust over Shauna’s shoulder in a weak hold and there was no laughter—only anger and tears.

Shauna set Jackie down gently and, as she stood back up, her shoulder gave an especially nasty pang. She winced and hissed.

That switched Jackie on, it seemed. She gasped, covering her mouth with a trembling hand. Wide-eyed, she looked up at Shauna, who was just sort of hovering over her at the edge of the bed, waiting to see if she was going to make a break for it.

Shauna sighed in relief, rubbing at her shoulder absentmindedly. “Hi,” she said, soft and almost a little shy.

“Oh, God,” Jackie whimpered, her hand still covering her mouth, muting her words.

“Jackie, can… do you mind if I dry off real quick? Change into something less…” Shauna waved a hand up and down the side of her body—the clothes she’d thrown on were properly drenched.

Jackie sat forward, resting her forehead in her palms. She nodded slowly. “Of course not. God, fuck.”

Five hours ago, Shauna wouldn’t have thought twice about her next move. She would’ve quickly stripped down, toweled off her hair and body, and slipped on some new clothes—right there, next to Jackie. And that is what she did in the end, because she thought that Jackie was still a flight risk, but she kept her back turned to her and it felt a little wrong suddenly. Regardless of what’d just happened, Jackie had left pissed at her and Shauna didn’t know where they would stand when this interlude was over. Once she’d changed, she started trying to apply the cream to her shoulder and back, struggling to reach the spots where she needed it most. Jackie had been eerily silent the entire time, so Shauna jumped when she felt gentle fingers on her back.

“Hand it to me.” Jackie’s voice was hoarse.

She reached around Shauna and wiggled her fingers expectantly. Shauna handed her the tube silently. She lifted the back of Shauna’s shirt up and over her shoulders and took her time rubbing everything in, massaging from Shauna’s shoulder down to the base of her spine. Shauna closed her eyes and let her head fall forward, stretching her neck and giving Jackie better access. She heard Jackie sniffling quietly.

The tube clicked shut. Shauna held her breath as she turned to face Jackie. Jackie’s hands immediately found purchase on Shauna’s cheeks and Shauna waited. She knew that Jackie would need to start the explanation herself. Jackie was quiet long enough for Shauna to grow bolder, placing gentle hands on her waist. It seemed as though that broke the spell.

“I didn’t know,” Jackie whispered. “I didn’t know what you went through after… after I was gone. They told me you were sad. I asked and they—” she hiccupped, “they said that you were sad but that you were fine and sort of still mad and probably b-better off. They didn’t tell me that you—you—” Jackie dissolved into sobs.

“Okay,” Shauna said softly, pulling her closer. Jackie slipped her hands off of her cheeks and wrapped them around her neck, pressing her forehead to her shoulder. “Okay, Jax. It’s okay. It was a long time ago, yeah? It’s okay. I’m okay.”

Shauna didn’t want to have this fucking conversation right now. She felt hot with embarrassment. She’d worked very actively for many years to not think about the way she’d behaved after Jackie’s presumed death, let alone discuss it with the woman herself.

“No. It—it isn’t okay. It isn’t. I should’ve known,” Jackie cried. “I never should’ve believed them. I should’ve known. I would’ve come back, if I’d known. I would’ve. You didn’t have to go through that. We could’ve had so much fucking time.”

Shauna shut her eyes and tipped her head back a little, fighting the ever-impending threat of dissolving into messy tears. “Can we… not talk about this right now? Just—I need a minute. This day has been…”

Shauna hadn't thought that she would ever find a topic that would be harder for her to discuss than the Jeff and Jackie situation, but it seemed as though Jackie had stumbled directly upon it while they'd been separated. Shauna couldn't fucking do this. Not right now.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm sorry."

Shauna nodded gratefully and Jackie pulled her close. They stood like that for a while, holding each other tight.

"Do we still have to have this fight?" Shauna asked eventually.

"Of course we do, love," Jackie whispered, running a hand up and down her back.

Shauna nodded against her again. "Can we at least sit down for it?"

This time it was Jackie who nodded, pulling away and taking Shauna's hand. She walked them over to the bed and they took the same positions they had so frequently lately—sitting cross-legged, facing each other.

"Did you feed yourself?" Jackie reached for the bedside phone.

Shauna pinched her nose against the headache that'd been coming on all day. "No."

"Me either. We need to eat."

Jackie called in a room service order while Shauna thought about all the times she'd fucking begged Jackie to eat out there. She spiraled deeper into that feeling, sinking into the panic. Losing Jackie, losing Jackie, losing Jackie. The fear she'd had since she was a little girl, interrupted by a long period of fruition, now back again. She was pulled out of her thoughts when Jackie placed her hands on her calves, her fingers hooked behind them like she was using her grip to hold herself up.

"I am so fucking furious with you," Jackie started. Shauna frowned, gulping down the retort that was playing on her tongue. She needed to let her finish. 'But I love you, okay?' Jackie continued. "I haven't stopped loving you because I'm angry." She ran her thumbs back and forth across Shauna's skin. "And I'm telling you that because I don't think we're gonna have any sort of real conversation if you're just trying to keep me."

Shauna took a shaky breath, placing her hands over Jackie's.

"You have me. And I know you want me. I'm not doubting that. So… I wanna know why the fuck you didn't tell me how—" Jackie shuddered, 'serious it actually was with you and Jeff back then.' Shauna closed her eyes until her forehead creased. A physical pain was burrowing in her chest from this fucking conversation already. "And I want you to tell me exactly what you said to him about me and why you said it. And Shauna? Open your eyes and look at me."

Shauna did. Jackie looked earnest—honest in both her anger and her kindness. And that, Shauna thought, was love. That was what love was supposed to fucking be.

"Shauna, I want honesty. Not manipulation. I will know if you're lying to me and I promise you that trying to bullshit your way out of this isn't gonna work. I want the truth. I mean it."

“Um, I—okay, I—” Shauna was floundering.

It was so rare that someone really called her out directly on the lying and it’d been the theme of this nightmare of a day. She started to cry just a little. Her throat felt overfull. Jackie narrowed her eyes, waiting. When Shauna didn’t speak right away, she sighed and turned her hands over so that Shauna could grasp them in her lap. Jackie gave them a little squeeze and looked at her expectantly. All Shauna had to do was be honest. That was all that Jackie was asking for. Except honesty had never come naturally to Shauna and how was she supposed to be honest, when she wasn’t even sure that she remembered the truth beneath all the layers of fabrication.

“It wasn’t serious to me,” Shauna said carefully. ‘I never had feelings for him. Truthfully. Which… maybe that’s worse?’ Jackie just raised her brows, her face open and patient, prompting Shauna to go on. “It was just… longer than I let you believe. The first time, we were fifteen. We didn’t have sex then… just… made out. You were broken up, he did come on to me. But yeah… the rest of the times, it… it was me.”

“Why, Shauna?”

Shauna felt her heart shatter at the little crack in Jackie’s voice. “I already told you why. You. I… wanted you.”

“Bullshit,” Jackie snapped.

She didn’t take her hands away and Shauna was so fucking grateful for that. She felt weightless in the worst way—she might float right off of the bed if Jackie decided to pull away.

“I… but you said—when I told you before, you said you already knew? That it made sense to you?”

“Yeah, it did. When you had me believing you got drunk and jealous a handful of times. But this? Years? No way. That isn’t the whole story. Bullshit.”

“Jax, I… really can’t remember everything I was thinking back then. I—”

“Oh, really? You can’t remember?” Jackie rasped. She would probably be raising her voice if she still had it in her. “You had an affair with my boyfriend for three fucking years and the best you can do is it was a long time ago, I don’t know? Try to remember, for fuck’s sake. You weren’t just, like, his other woman, Shauna. You were—I mean—it’s like…” Jackie shook her head, her face scrunched in disgust. “It’s like you were cheating on me too, you know? You get that right?”

Shauna truly had not gotten that until the moment that she heard it tumble out of Jackie’s lips.

Fuck.

“You get that I don’t care about him?” Jackie continued. “I meant it when I said it—I don’t give a fuck about him. It’s about us. You and me. It always has been. And everything I thought we had, every memory of us being… together like that is…” Jackie did move one hand out of Shauna’s, using it to brush stray hairs off her own forehead. Shauna clung to her

other hand tighter. “It’s fucking tainted now, because you were lying to me the entire fucking time.”

They were both crying. That’s what they did now—they sat in bed and cried. But Shauna watched Jackie’s pretty face return to a more neutral expression and felt her warm fingers slip back into her hand and listened to her deep breaths and thought that she didn’t even care if that’s all they did for a year, as long as they were doing it together.

“I don’t have a pretty way to say it.” Shauna searched for better words, even as she spoke. “I just meant that… I don’t have a succinct understanding or—or explanation of my motives for the shit I did then. I never really did. And I can try and give you the piecemeal, rough thoughts I remember having, but… I don’t feel any of those things anymore. I haven’t in a long, long time and I don’t want to… just hurt you.”

“I’m hurt! I… am… fucking… hurt,” Jackie said indignantly. She looked exactly like she had as a teenager in that moment—head cocked to the side, lips pursed, an are you fucking kidding me expression on her face. “Consider me as hurt as it gets right now. I don’t know how to make it any clearer to you that you cannot possibly make this worse, unless you fucking lie to me.”

“I was in love with you. That’s true—always, it’s always been true. But… I don’t know when I figured that out. Or, I guess I always knew, deep down. But when I let myself admit it. I don’t think it was until later, really. Senior year? So I sort of… well, I went through a lot of reasons for the feelings I was having. I was trying to make sense of it. I was jealous of you. We were teenagers and you were the girl everybody wanted. You were the hot one.”

“I hate to break this to you, Shauna, but you weren’t exactly an ugly duckling,” Jackie scoffed. “Just as many people wanted you. Maybe more, I don’t even know.”

“No, but see? You’re missing the fucking point!” Shauna snapped.

Jackie flinched. Shit.

“Sorry. Sorry,” Shauna said, gripping her hands even tighter. Jackie relaxed a little. ‘It’s just, you never let me feel that way. You always corrected me. You corrected me about my own feelings, Jackie.’ Shauna took a deep breath, trying to center herself. “I believe that you believe in what you’re saying. But I promise you, you were the one people wanted. Guys asked me about you constantly. Asked me for your number, if I thought you’d go out with them, what your favorite movies were, so they could name drop them.”

Shauna laughed, the memory of bitterness watered down with the realizations she’d made in the time since. The fucking ridiculousness of those feelings, when Jackie hadn’t wanted any of those boys. She’d wanted Shauna. Jackie frowned again.

“And there were two problems with that, Jax. One was easy for me to understand. You got all the attention. I only mattered when I was in your orbit. But the other thing… I—I was desperately in love with you. Scary love. I didn’t want to share you with anyone. Ever. I would get so jealous I could barely breathe, thinking about those guys touching you. But I didn’t know why, so I put it all on the… the fucking I’m not the hot friend jealously and let it burn there.”

Jackie chewed on her lip, mulling it over.

“So, yeah. I did resent you sometimes,” Shauna added, when it was clear that Jackie wasn’t ready to respond. ‘I… I wanted to ruin your relationship with him. I wanted you single. I did—fuck. Yeah, I did fucking sabotage things intentionally when you two were happy, like he said I did.’ Shauna could feel herself blushing, embarrassment flooding her yet again. “But I think… I could’ve ruined your relationship in a lot of different ways. Less… hands on ways.”

Jackie rolled her eyes at the phrasing. It was barely perceptible, but Shauna noticed it.

“I fucked Jeff because I could. Honestly. That’s it. I was an idiot teenager and it made me feel special and powerful to know that a guy who wanted you, who had you, could want me too. I wanted to be wanted. But it is true that most of all I just fucking wanted you.”

“You had me!” Jackie yelped, yanking her hands out of Shauna’s. Shauna had been right—she did feel like she was no longer tethered by gravity, like she could float up and away at any moment. She gripped the comforter with shaking fists.

“You had me. I was yours,” Jackie cried. “That’s where it stops making sense.”

“I did not have you. Not how I wanted you. I got to kiss you when you were drunk, Jackie. Then I got to turn around and listen to you cry about Jeff. You made me watch you with him!” Shauna yelled. “Dragged me along as a third wheel while you stuck your tongue down his throat! He was the boyfriend. I was the dirty, little, drunken secret. I remember wishing I could just—just be your fucking boyfriend! I wanted to kiss you in public, I wanted to take you to prom, I wanted to hear you say you loved me and know you meant it like that.”

Shauna’s arms had crossed as she spoke, her nails digging into her skin. Jackie untangled them, laying them softly at her sides.

She put a gentle hand under Shauna’s jaw. “I meant it like that. God, did I mean it like that,” she whispered. “I thought you knew. You didn’t… you never said it back when I said it like that.” She wiped a tear from Shauna’s cheek.

“I thought if you meant it like that, then you would’ve broken up with him. I never said it back because saying it back would make it real for me and I was fucking terrified.”

Jackie kissed her. Sweet, slow, sure lips. She tasted like salt and coffee.

She still loves me. She still wants me. It’s okay. We’re okay.

When Jackie pulled away, Shauna whined audibly.

Jackie flashed her a sad smile, her eyes still glassy. “I’m so terrified right now,” she said softly. “I’m so terrified that I’m an idiot and you’re never gonna leave him. That if it comes down to me or him, which it is, by the way—I told you I’m not sharing you—that you’ll choose him.”

“I love you,” Shauna said, stubbornly. “I don’t want him, Jax. I’ve never wanted him.”

“You married him.” Jackie’s hands curled into fists on the bed between them.

“You weren’t there!” Shauna cried. “I’ve never loved anyone like I love you. He was just there and I was sad and alone. You are all I fucking think about. Every day, every decision I made, was about feeling closer to you. I got it wrong sometimes. Really wrong. But that

doesn't change the fact that my entire life has been about loving you. I chose you every day, even when I thought you were dead. I've been in love with you since before I knew what love was and I stayed in love with you even when I thought you were gone."

She could feel her nose running, used a sleeve to wipe at it roughly.

"Jax, you're my… you're my everything. I don't know how else to say it or what I can do to make you believe it. I love you. I choose you. I chose you every day, even when you weren't an option."

Shauna knew that she sounded desperate, repetitive. She couldn't help it. She needed Jackie to understand.

Jackie turned her hands over, still on the mattress, so that her palms were up. Shauna took them in her own quickly and exhaled in relief when Jackie squeezed.

"I love you, too. I'm still mad," Jackie whispered. Her throat sounded so raw that Shauna felt the sting of it in her own. "This conversation isn't over. But we have to meet with everybody else, we've already pushed it too long." She was trying to sound stoic, but her lip trembled and her hands shook in Shauna's.

Shauna nodded, then tried tugging Jackie's hands, just an inch or two toward herself—asking without words if she would come closer. Jackie sighed and scooted herself close enough to press their foreheads together.

"I'm not leaving you, baby. I'm here." Jackie brought one hand up to rest on the back of Shauna's head. "I know you're scared. But I promise you, I'm not leaving and you need to accept that, because I'm not gonna let you use that fear as an excuse to treat me like shit. I love you more than anyone else in the world, but I don't love you more than I love myself anymore. I won't let you play games with me."

"I'm not a good person," Shauna whispered. 'If your real problem is choosing me I… I understand,' she choked on her words. "If you need a… a reason to leave. A guilt free one. If that's what you're looking for, then—"

Jackie cut her off with a kiss. This one was deep, Jackie's tongue prodding urgently at Shauna's lips. Shauna opened her mouth to her and Jackie pushed forward, climbing into her lap. Shauna slipped her hands under her shirt, letting them run over the warm skin of her back just above her waistband. Jackie wound both hands through her hair, pulling her closer.

There was a knock at the door. They broke apart, Jackie still perched in her lap.

"Room service!" a cheery voice called.

"Thank you!" Jackie yelled back. "Just go ahead and leave it at the door, we'll grab it in just a sec!" She sounded so chipper. Even with her weak voice, she managed to force a sweet tone.

She looked down at Shauna, settling her arms around her neck. "None of us are good people, baby," she said with a warm smile. 'Not you, not me, not Tai or Van or any of the others. Not Jeff, even. Definitely not Jeff, actually.' Jackie rolled her eyes. Shauna cracked a tentative smile. "None of us. It isn't about what kind of person you are. I know you. I love you. You need to just… fucking let me." Jackie started playing with Shauna's hair, pulling the

pins from it and tossing them aside as she spoke, so that she had free reign of it. “You never let me.”

“Yeah but, Jax, I’m not—I’m worse. I’ve never been a good person. It wasn’t just the… the fucking woods. I’ve always been like this and I don’t understand how you can just forgive me when I hurt you over and over and—” Shauna was ramping up, her voice pitching higher and shoulders rising nearer to her ears. She was frustrated with Jackie, truly, for letting her walk all over her. It was pissing her off, suddenly.

“You aren’t a forgiving person, so you assign weakness to it,” Jackie said softly. “I see what you’re doing right now. But it isn’t weak, Shauna. It’s compassion. It’s mercy. It’s love. You’re taking something good and whole in me and twisting it so you can be mad about something.”

Shauna opened her mouth to speak. Jackie put a finger to her lips.

“You think who you are is some big mystery to me?” Jackie ran her fingers back up through Shauna’s hair. ‘It isn’t. I know who you are and I choose to forgive you. That doesn’t make me stupid or weak. You being mad about that doesn’t have a single thing to do with me. That’s your shit. I see the good in you and it outweighs it all for me.’ Jackie cupped Shauna’s face in her hands. “You didn’t fool me. I’m not an idiot. So drop the God complex and stop telling yourself that you tricked me into loving you, because you didn’t and you’re gonna ruin us.”

Shauna was silent for a long while. “That’s—” she cleared her throat. “I’m…” she murmured. “I don’t… I—fuck, when did you start talking like that? I don’t even know how to respond to that.”

“Mmm.” Jackie wrapped her arms around Shauna in a tight embrace. ‘Don’t respond then. Not right now. Just think about it.’ Shauna nodded against her, running her hands up and down her back. “Shauna?”

“Yeah?”

“I think you’ve punished yourself for years. I think you need to focus on treating me right now.”

“I think you’re right, Jax,” Shauna mumbled into her hair.

Jackie pulled back, scooting herself off Shauna’s lap. “Do you believe me when I tell you that I love you and we’re gonna be okay?”

“I do,” Shauna answered softly.

“Good. Because I’m fucking pissed. And I’m gonna be pissed for a minute. You don’t need to dwell on the past, but I’m just fucking finding out about it. I get to be mad,” Jackie said, pursing her lips. Shauna frowned, thrown by the sudden shift in mood. ‘Don’t pout at me,’ Jackie added quickly. “I gave you more than enough leeway, just now. The things you did to hurt me… that shit feels fresh. I need to process it and you need to be okay with that. Okay?”

“Okay, baby,” Shauna said softly, testing the waters.

Jackie’s face softened, just a little, as she stood. “Let’s eat before we have to show face in their room,” she said with a heavy sigh.

Fuck, this day was never going to end.

12. they remind me of you

1987

"Oh, look Shauna!"

Jackie stopped suddenly. Shauna skidded to a halt, the toes of her black converse brushing against the heels of Jackie's baby pink ones.

"What?" She stepped back and squinted in the direction that Jackie was looking. "I don't see anything."

"Across the street." Jackie grabbed Shauna's hand to tug her closer and pointed. "Can't you see the flowers? Through the fence?"

Shauna tried to follow Jackie's outstretched finger exactly, lining her eyes up with it. Her nail polish was chipped, a pink that almost matched her shoes, and flaking off in tiny patches. She would probably ask Shauna to repaint them later, laying her hands in Shauna's lap expectantly.

"I pretty much just see a fence, Jax."

"Oh, come on," Jackie groaned. 'The yellow? My favorite color, y'know.' Jackie smiled dreamily. Shauna really just saw a wooden fence. "Let's cross."

Jackie dragged Shauna across the quiet street at a jog. They made it to the fence in question. A few petals, sunshine yellow, were sticking out between two of the slats.

"How on earth did you see that?"

"I dunno, I just did." Jackie shifted Shauna by her shoulders, so that she could peer through a gap in the fence. The yard was full of the yellow flowers, lining the perimeter in neat rows. "Look!"

"Pretty," Shauna said simply. She didn't really think they were all that special, but Jackie did and she liked the way they made Jackie smile.

"I think the woman who lived here moved away. Remember?" Jackie blinked at Shauna and she frowned, waiting for more explanation because no, she didn't know that the woman who lived here had moved away. 'Emily's grandma? She moved to Florida, or something,' Jackie explained. "A few weeks ago. Emily cried about it during music class."

Shauna remembered Emily crying, but she wouldn't have known why. Jackie was like that. She asked people loads of questions and she always remembered their answers.

"Oh yeah, you're right," Shauna agreed anyway. "So… nobody lives here right now, huh?"

"Probably not." Jackie sighed. "All those pretty flowers and no one to even look at them."

"You want some?" Shauna asked, a mischievous glint in her eye.

"What?" Jackie laughed. "How, Shipman? There's no gate, silly."

“I can climb that.” Shauna shrugged. “Not a big deal.”

“You would do that?” Jackie’s eyes lit up as she grinned. “For me?”

“Sure, why not?”

“You have to be, like, super careful, okay?” Jackie eyed the fence wearily. “I don’t wanna have to climb in after you if you break your ankle or something.”

“I know how to climb a fence, Jackie.”

Jackie nodded and watched her anxiously as she hiked herself up and over. She dropped down on the other side.

“You okay?” Jackie called out immediately.

“Uh huh,” Shauna mumbled, focused on picking the prettiest and fullest of the bunch. (Dahlias, her mom would later tell them, when they came bounding in through the sliding back door.)

The delighted giggle that Jackie let out when Shauna hopped back over, landing in front of her and passing her the bundle, sounded much prettier than any of the singing in their music class had ever managed to be.

“Thank you,” Jackie squeaked, throwing her arms around Shauna in a bear hug. The petals tickled the back of Shauna’s neck. She squeezed Jackie back. “They’re perfect.”

“You’re welcome.” Shauna’s voice came out higher than usual, because Jackie was holding her just a little too tight.

OCTOBER 13TH, 1995

Shauna was waiting for Jackie, Kevin Carnold idling at the curb. They’d argued yesterday, over nothing really. Whether or not to go to some dumb kick back with Jeff and his friends. Jackie didn’t want to go without Shauna, Shauna didn’t want to go at all. Jeff made Jackie feel guilty for saying no to him, Jackie made Shauna feel guilty for saying no to her.

They went in the end.

She’d watched Jeff put his hands all over Jackie. They’d lingered at the nape of her neck, where her baby hairs curled against her skin. They’d rested on her cheeks, a sweet pink flush at the apples of them from the cold rolling in. They’d brushed against her thigh, right where a purple bruise was blooming. (Shauna knew it was from Jackie swinging the car door open at the wrong angle, but she’d let herself imagine that it was her body’s way of rejecting his touch.)

Shauna had picked a fight in the car on the way back.

But today was Jackie’s birthday—eighteen. A big one. So that morning Shauna had left early, stopping at the only supermarket open before school. She’d checked their flower section the week before, just to make sure they had the right ones.

Eighteen dahlias—sunset shades of yellow and orange—tied off in a bow of black tulle. They were sitting in the back, tucked behind her seat so that Jackie wouldn't see them right away.

Jackie walked down her driveway and Shauna's heart fluttered just like it always fucking did when she watched her like this. A little jump—one she could write off as jealousy or frustration sometimes. Except it was starting to get difficult to pass off the gnawing emptiness that she felt in her chest as anything other than longing and she didn't know what the fuck that meant for—

Oh. Oh no.

Jackie was crying. Tears clinging to her lashes, mascara starting to run, lips held shut in a firm line against the quiver in her jaw. Shauna swung the door open for her and she climbed in, staring resolutely ahead. She tossed her backpack behind her without turning.

"Jackie…" Shauna said carefully.

Jackie just breathed in quickly through her nose, gathering herself. She pieced herself back together methodically—her face relaxed, her lips stopped trembling, she dabbed beneath her eyes and no more tears appeared.

Then she faced Shauna with a forced smile.

"Hey." Her voice was only the slightest bit shaky. Someone else might not have noticed. But Shauna wasn't someone else. She could hear the heartbreak, loud and clear in just that one syllable.

Shauna brought her hand to Jackie's shoulder and let her thumb sweep back and forth against her neck. "You okay?"

Jackie nodded quickly, refusing to open her mouth.

"Right, well—" Shauna reached around to the backseat to grab the bouquet. "Happy birthday, Jax. There's eighteen, cause, y'know…" She held the flowers out to her with a cautious smile.

Jackie didn't move to take them. Her lips turned down into the smallest of frowns. Her eyes widened and her throat bobbed, like she was working at swallowing something lodged there.

"Jackie?" Shauna asked, dropping the bouquet on the dash. "What's—"

Jackie was sobbing, suddenly—gasping in air between cries so deep they made Shauna's chest ache. Her entire body shook, almost like the shivers she got when it was too cold in Shauna's attic bedroom and Shauna had to pull her close under the comforter to warm her up.

"Oh, fuck. Oh, sweetie, c'mere." Shauna pulled her into a hug. "What's going on?" She rubbed a hand up and down Jackie's back, listening to her sputter through her tears, as she tried to form an answer.

"You—you—" Jackie paused to gulp down some air, "—g-got me dahlias!"

“I… you’re…” Shauna’s hand stilled on the small of Jackie’s back. She fought desperately to work out the meaning behind Jackie’s words, but Jackie cried harder when she paused, so she trailed her fingers back up her spine. “You’re crying because… because I… got you dahlias?”

Jackie shook her head frantically against Shauna’s neck. “Yellow dahlias,” she blubbered between cries.

“Those… I thought—but those are your favorite? Should I have… did you want something different?”

Jackie shook her head again, her chin digging into Shauna’s shoulder. “They are my favorite!” she whined, verging on hysterical.

Shauna had no idea what to make of it. Jackie so rarely lost her composure anymore, especially not when her makeup was done. Especially not on her birthday, when everyone would be stopping her in the halls.

Shauna had no idea what to say, either, so she dropped a kiss to Jackie’s temple, smoothing her hair back with her free hand. Jackie inhaled sharply, but the breaths that followed seemed to slow just a bit. The subtle shift might’ve been in Shauna’s head—a trick her desperate mind was playing on her—but she tried again. She pressed kiss after kiss to Jackie’s temple, her forehead, her hair, until she was confident that it was working, because Jackie’s gut-wrenching sobs had softened to quiet sniffles.

She wanted to kiss her for real—to pull Jackie’s head back and catch her lips with her own and stay like that until Jackie wasn’t broken anymore. But she knew that she couldn’t get away with that. Not sober, not in the harsh light of day, not in a serious moment like this.

“Can you tell me what’s going on now?” Shauna asked instead.

Jackie pulled away, wiping her nose on her sleeve. Her eyes were red and puffy, black smeared all the way down to her cheeks. Shauna dug for some napkins in the glovebox, wiping Jackie’s face gently until she took them herself, flipping down the visor and groaning at her reflection as she removed the streaks.

“My parents forgot my stupid birthday. They planned a last minute weekend trip and left a note saying they’d be back Monday. Left before I got up. We were supposed to get dinner or something this weekend. I know it’s dumb to care but—” her voice stalled out as she swallowed back more tears.

Those fucking assholes. Those horrible fucking lazy monsters. Sometimes Shauna wondered why they’d had a daughter at all, when all they seemed to want to do was torture her or ignore her. Good fucking riddance to them, though. Shauna had expected the worst when she’d heard about the dinner plans—Jackie calling her in tears because her mother had tricked her by offering her a slice of cake, only to follow it up with a snide remark about her dress looking tight. The Taylors bailing completely, though? That was something that Shauna could manage. She had an entire weekend to ease the sting of their abandonment. She could make Jackie happy enough to forget she’d even cried about it.

“It’s not dumb.” Shauna rested a hand on Jackie’s knee.

“And,” Jackie flipped the visor back up and turned to face her, “Jeff said he… he wants to…” she shuddered, swallowing hard, “have sex tonight. Like… all the way.”

Shauna’s heart sank. Nausea flooded her—everything between her throat and her stomach churned with sick. She felt a hit of anger at the thought of Jeff touching Jackie like that—of him spreading her thighs and putting himself inside of her. She knew they’d done things. She knew that she was the world’s biggest hypocrite. And Shauna knew firsthand that sex wasn’t the big fucking deal people made it out to be, but that didn’t stop her from shaking at the image of Jeff fucking Jackie. She’d bled a little, that first time. Jeff had thrust into her too fast or something. Or maybe she just hadn’t been wet enough. But blood had trickled down her thigh and stained the seat of his shitty car and Jackie shouldn’t bleed because Jeff Sadecki didn’t know how to stick his dick in a girl without hurting her.

“He said he’ll make it special like I… I want,” Jackie mumbled. “Because it’s my birthday he thinks, like, I don’t know. That that’s more meaningful?”

“Do you—” Shauna cleared her throat and peeled her hand off of Jackie’s thigh so that she couldn’t squeeze too hard. “Do you, like… want that?”

“Do I look like I want that? I’m like, literally sobbing about it.” Jackie’s eyes were glistening, pools of hazel that Shauna could barely stand to look into. “But I don’t know how to keep putting it off. He’s getting sick of waiting for me to want that.”

“Why don’t you just break up with him then? I don’t fucking get it,” Shauna snapped.

Jackie flinched like Shauna had slapped her. “I—I can’t just—I—I—” she dissolved into sobs again.

Shit.

“Okay, okay, Jax. I’m sorry.” Shauna pulled her against her side with one arm, wrapping it tight around her shoulders. “It’s just… you don’t even like him. I don’t get it. You shouldn’t have to… do that with him if you don’t want to. You could break up with him. It’s not like you haven’t before.”

Jackie tucked herself into Shauna, her head down and her face hidden. “You don’t get it!” she cried. “I’m not… I’m not normal. I have to have a boyfriend, Shauna. I have to. Okay?”

Shauna didn’t get it. No part of her understood why Jackie felt like being single was the worst thing that could happen to someone. Like Shauna was diseased for not letting some idiot guy parade her around Wiskayok. She let it lie though, running her fingers up and down Jackie’s arm.

“Okay, I guess. But… you still shouldn’t do anything you don’t wanna do. What do you wanna do tonight?”

“I just wanna be with you,” Jackie whispered.

“I think we can make that happen.” Shauna jostled her shoulders a little. Jackie cracked a barely there smile. “Anything you wanna do in particular? I could take you to the movies? Dinner?”

“It’s Friday the thirteenth,” Jackie groaned. “I don’t wanna be out tonight, it’s all spooky. Bad luck and everything.”

Shauna laughed, leaning back to assess her. Jackie looked a bit better now. More herself, her lips upturned and her eyes darting around Shauna's face.

"Right, good call. Wouldn't want to be out and about with all the ghouls and ghosts." Shauna feigned seriousness. Jackie swatted her shoulder. "So why don't we just plan on staying at yours? You can decide what you wanna do later. We can just hang out."

Jackie nodded, sniffling. She looked better, but still unstable—like one wrong word could send her spiraling.

"Wanna start now?" Shauna asked quickly, before she could talk herself out of it.

"What?" Jackie tilted her head and blinked at Shauna.

"Wanna start now?" Shauna repeated. "Skip school. We can go back to sleep for a while, pick up something for lunch? Your parents aren't home, so… who cares, right?"

Jackie gave her prettiest grin. "Shauna Shipman, you would skip your fancy, shmancy AP classes for little old me?" She pressed her hand to her chest, her expression one of exaggerated shock.

Shauna giggled, brushing Jackie's hair behind her ear. "Jackie Taylor, I would do just about anything for you."

Shauna shoved down at the guilt bubbling in her stomach. Everything she said to Jackie lately was both true and not—so real she felt it in her bones and such a blatant fucking lie it made her sick.

Jackie squealed, snatching the flowers off the dash and throwing herself out of the car. "What are you waiting for?" She bounced on her heels in excitement. 'Let's move, Shipman! We have pancakes to eat, which means you have pancakes to make, and then a nap to take, and then a whole birthday to have.' Jackie held the dahlias up, breathing them in. "And flowers to get in some water, stat."

Shauna slung both of their backpacks over her arm and laughed as she followed Jackie up the driveway.

Fall 1996

Shauna reached out to grab Jackie's bony wrist. Her stomach churned angrily, as Jackie took another half-step forward.

"Hey, Jackie," Shauna said hastily, because she needed to give reasons for touching her now, couldn't just pull her close whenever she wanted.

Jackie stopped.

"What?" Jackie demanded.

"Do you see that? Over there," Shauna pointed. Jackie followed her gaze. "The yellow?"

Little specks of yellow stood out among the green in a less densely forested space off to their left—not many, maybe a dozen? Maybe two?

“Mmm, yeah.” Jackie answered, slipping her wrist out of Shauna’s hand so she could interlock their fingers instead. Shauna all but hummed at the contact. “What do you think it is?”

“Dunno. Let’s check.” Shauna squeezed Jackie’s hand quickly and led her towards the clearing. “Could be edible.”

They moved quickly, dodging the gnarled, angry roots of the trees together in time.

“Oh!” Jackie’s voice was breathy, excited but contained. They all tempered what little excitement they had now. “Dandelions, huh? God, isn’t it late for them?”

Shauna smiled, dropping Jackie’s hand to bend down and pick one carefully.

“Probably,” she said. “What month do you think it is, anyway?”

“Early fall. October, maybe? Does it matter?” Jackie was beginning to sound pissy again.

Shauna felt herself grow angry, familiar sharp heat in her stomach, clawing at her. She shoved it away.

“It’s just… I wonder if you’re 19,” Shauna said, her voice trailing off into a nervous whisper.

She held her hand out to Jackie, the dandelion pinched delicately between her fingers. Jackie simply stared at her, her jaw set and her eyes glassy.

“It’s not a dahlia, but it’s… well, it’s yellow. It’s something.” Shauna shrugged. “Close for out here.”

Jackie sighed, her whole chest shaking with the effort.

“Do you know why dahlias are my favorite?” she asked, taking the flower and rolling the stem between her fingers, making the petals dance in a twirl.

“I… God, they just always have been, right?” Shauna asked. “Even when we were kids… that one time I got them from that lady’s yard. Do you remember? They were already your favorite then.”

“Mmm, no,” Jackie said. “I mean, yeah, of course I remember that. But they weren’t my favorite already.”

To say Jackie looked upset would be a grave understatement. She looked heavy, broken somehow. She looked like she was grieving.

Shauna shivered.

“They’re my favorite because of that time. When you hopped the fence to pick them for me. I just thought they were pretty. I didn’t have a favorite flower before that, I don’t think,” Jackie continued, with a humorless, airy laugh. “They’re my *favorite* because they remind me of you.”

PRESENT

The room was dead silent. All the women were sat waiting—for what exactly, Shauna couldn't even be certain—in a circle on the floor.

Lottie's arm was wrapped in gauze and tape. The wound on her forehead wasn't as bad as it'd looked when it was actively bleeding. Misty had drawn it together with a special bandage, and that was the most visible thing about it now. She leaned against the wall, arms and legs crossed. Her dark hair was pulled back in a messy, low bun. It was clear she'd been crying from the pink splotches on her cheeks, but her expression was impressively neutral.

To her right was Van, back to the same wall, legs kicked out in front of her. She shook one foot back and forth rapidly, a buzz of energy. She'd pulled her jacket off and spread it across her lap, exposing her freckled arms. The bruise on her face was transitioning from red to purple, spread from the slightly warped line of her nose to the center of her cheek in the shape of a butterfly's wing.

Shauna had expected Tai to be next to Van, but instead Misty perched there. She didn't lean against anything, just swung her legs to the side and rested her weight on her hand. Her glasses had a little crack along the frame that Shauna hadn't noticed before. She wondered if it was from the fight or from Jackie's firm slap. Her slap which, Shauna realized, had left a faint pink tinge on the side of Misty's face. Misty wore a tee shirt with little illustrated cats strewn across it. She fussed with it, pulling on the hem as she snuck glances at Nat.

Tai was next, propped up against the small wardrobe. Perfect posture, dressed considerably nicer than the rest of them. Slacks, like they were going to an actual meeting instead of… whatever this was. She was trying not to look annoyed but failing miserably, her brows drawn together and her nostrils flared. She'd given Shauna a small, encouraging smile when she sat next to her, but it quickly vanished. Her arms were dotted with dark patches—the beginnings of new bruises.

Shauna and Jackie both leaned against the bed, their legs stretched out. There was a foot of space between them. Shauna hated it. She wanted to cling to Jackie. It startled her a bit, realizing how comfortable she would've been wrapping her arms around Jackie's waist, pulling her close in front of everyone. She'd forgotten just how much she *didn't* hate PDA when it was with Jackie.

She didn't do it, though, because when Jackie had sat to her right, she'd purposefully left that gap between them and folded her hands in her lap. Shauna didn't know whether it was because of the rocky dynamics with the group at large or because Jackie was still pissed with her in particular. Either way, she didn't think it wise to push.

Jackie's hair was still slicked back. The cut just above her brow looked worse than Lottie's, red and serrated, but it wasn't clear whether that was just because she hadn't bothered to care for it properly. She did have hickeys on her neck, Jeff had been right about that, but they blended in with the marks that trailed down her chest and shoulders from the cult freaks. She ran her thumb over her middle finger mindlessly—where she'd once worn the ring that was now on Shauna's hand.

On Jackie's other side was Nat. She'd positioned herself closer to Jackie than Lottie. The soles of her feet were pressed together and her hips open, like she was attending some yoga class, rather than a meeting from hell. There were trace remnants of makeup on her eyes, black smudged just around the waterlines. The bruises up and down her arms were healing,

finally more brown than blue. She stretched her neck side to side, tension pulling at her features.

"So…" Van said, clearing her throat. 'So far, Misty's filmed us and pseudo blackmailed Jackie,' she glanced at Misty, whose mouth formed a surprised *O* , "Tai tried to do a runner —"

The rest of the room matched Misty's shocked expression, except Tai, who glared sharply at Van.

"—I stopped her, it's fine," Van continued. "Shauna's decked me and threatened to kill Lot, Jackie's smacked Misty upside the head and attacked Lot, and Nat's threatened Misty with broken glass."

Nobody spoke, nobody moved.

"Did I miss anything?" Van added.

"You and Lottie are coming out of this sounding real innocent," Nat said, her brow raised. "And I seem to remember our very own Jacqueline throwing a projectile at your head earlier." She gestured vaguely to where the glass had landed.

The remnants were gone now. Shauna wondered who'd cleaned it up, imagined Misty with a dustpan stolen from a housekeeping cart, Nat using a plush hotel towel to scoop it all up at once, Taissa picking up the pieces carefully with her bare hands.

"You provoked Shauna, Van," Lottie said quietly. "You *know* you did. And I—well, none of us are without fault here."

Van nodded, with pursed lips, looking down at her lap and fiddling with the sleeves of her jacket.

"We're, um, fine," Shauna said weakly. "We worked it out, I think."

"There's something else," Jackie said suddenly, sounding almost annoyed. Everyone's eyes shifted to her, and she closed her own briefly when Van looked up. "We, like, *murdered* six people? Anyone remember that or…?"

There was a grumble of agreement.

"I was more going for… crimes against each other, first." Van shrugged. "But… yeah, that too."

"We need to stop attacking each other," Tai said steadily. "It's getting ridiculous. We're only together to get out of this thing, right? So how is fighting with each other instead of figuring out what the fuck to do benefitting us?"

Nat scoffed. "I don't think the *infighting* is the only distraction here," she said.

Lottie groaned, dropped her head in her hands.

"What—" Tai started, but Nat cut her off.

"We need to be done with the fighting *and* the dyke drama. Or at least not let it fuck with us like this. Jackie's right. We have a big fucking mess to clean up, but we're too busy with

this… relationship bullshit."

Shauna blushed, her cheeks hot, as she allowed her eyes to fall on Jackie. Jackie was clearly trying not to cry, swallowing at nothing and staring stubbornly ahead. Van and Tai looked at each other for half a second before turning away. Misty frowned, some amalgamation of confusion and hurt.

"Everyone needs to stop fucking each other, or crying about not fucking each other, or whatever the hell this mess is," Nat said, rubbing the back of her neck. "We've gotta put this shit on hold."

Taissa rolled her eyes. "I really don't think that's the biggest issue, right now."

"Really?" Nat shot back. "*Miss* runs off with Van for hours at a time when I'm trying to talk strategy?"

"Why are we talking strategy without everyone present?" Misty asked, genuinely concerned.

"Nat, you disappeared with Jackie for half the day because she and Shauna were having a love triangle showdown in the goddamn hallway!" Tai snapped. 'Sorry,' she mumbled to Shauna, who gaped at her. "I'm just saying, I'm not the one—"

"They're different," Nat said. "They're like, trying to be human when their whole, entire, fucking world's imploded. It's not just… relationship shit." She sounded distant, suddenly. Lottie's hand twitched towards her, but she changed course, letting it fall to her side with a sigh.

Shauna flashed Jackie a questioning look.

Jackie just mouthed *"I don't know,"* shook her head, and shrugged her shoulders up.

Tai opened her mouth to speak, clearly ready to unleash something, but Van beat her to the punch.

"Tai, they're…" Van said gently. "This is a big shock for them. They didn't know they had an option, is all she's saying. It's…"

"Yeah, we didn't," Jackie spat. "And whose fucking fault is that?"

Uh oh.

Shauna reached for Jackie's hand, but she yanked it away before Shauna could touch.

"Whoa, Jackie." Nat's fingers did manage to connect, brushing Jackie's elbow. "I'm not saying it gives you a free pass on this *getting along* thing."

Jackie shrugged her off. "I tried getting along. I tried it then, I tried it now. I tried so hard when you guys were giving *fuck all* back." Jackie's voice wavered. She squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep, shaky breath.

Shauna scooted closer to her, closing the gap between them so that their legs rested against each other. She didn't try to touch her, her hands carefully planted on her own knees.

Three knocks. The same voice Jackie and Shauna heard earlier.

"Room service!"

Lottie jumped to her feet. She strode through the circle to answer, breaking everyone's focus with the newly unbothered sway of her hips.

"Thank you so much!" she chirped.

Her voice sounded thick with mucus, and the woman at the door blinked at her warily.

"Uh, no problem, ma'am," the woman said, glancing at the gaggle of teary women behind her. She rolled a service cart into the room. "Somebody's birthday?" she asked.

"What?" Lottie asked absently. "Oh, yeah. Yeah, birthday. Mhmm."

"Right, well… just go ahead and put the cart out in the hall when you're done," the woman said with an exaggerated smile, backing rather quickly out of the room.

"Birthday?" Tai asked.

Lottie dragged the cart in, shutting and latching the door behind it. "Did you know that room service will bring you an entire cake?" she asked, lifting a silver lid off of one of the platters. "I ordered three."

The tension broke.

Nat laughed first, leaning forward to clutch her stomach, her eyes watering. Van snorted next, shaking her head and grinning. Eventually, they all joined.

Nat moved closer to Shauna and Jackie, lying on her stomach with her head in her hand. The three of them took turns picking at a lemon cake, complete with candied peels on top. Van and Lottie were huddled together across the room, a chocolate cake perched right on Lottie's lap. Tai and Misty pushed a white cake with raspberries lining the top back and forth as they took bites.

"Dyke drama," Van muttered under her breath with a chuckle. Tai grinned, popping a raspberry in her mouth.

"You know," Misty said with a small smile, "this is why they don't let people date their teammates nowadays."

Shauna watched as Jackie let out a genuine laugh, marveling at the long line of her neck when she threw her head back.

"Shauna's getting a crash course," Tai smirked at her, 'with these two.' She tilted her head between Van and Jackie. "Learning all the things you probably would've dealt with in your twenties, if you hadn't gone and *settled down.*"

Jackie was still angry—Shauna watched her smile falter. Van bit back a chuckle, eyeing Jackie carefully. For her part, Shauna couldn't fucking believe that Tai was willing to joke about Van and Jackie, now, had an inkling that Tai's sudden change of heart had a lot to do with the way they were suddenly at odds.

"I'm… I'm not even sure… can I even *say* that?" Shauna asked, her voice unnaturally pitchy and high.

“Say what?” Tai asked, but she gave a knowing look, as though she was waiting for a punchline.

“Y’know… *dyke?”* Shauna answered quietly, shrugging her shoulders and raising her brows like it was something conspiratorial between them.

Jackie, Tai, Van, and Lottie burst into renewed fits of laughter. Jackie wiped at the tears forming under her eyes, her face pink as she gasped in her breaths. Misty looked genuinely curious about the answer to Shauna’s question.

Nat snorted before saying, “I sure hope you can at this point,” with a roll of her eyes. She glanced at Jackie and added, “Or should we get the princess a nice little pillow?”

Shauna looked at her sideways, then at Jackie, who opened her mouth wide in amused shock.

“She can,” Jackie answered fervently. “You can,” she repeated, her eyes on Shauna and her mouth pulling back into a pretty smile.

Shauna had no clue what the fuck was going on, but she didn’t really care as long as Jackie kept smiling at her like that. Jackie must’ve noticed her confusion, because she ran a hand through Shauna’s hair before resting it on her cheek.

“I’ll explain it later,” Jackie said, with another laugh.

“I hate to kill this vibe,” Nat said, as the giggles subsided, ‘but I think it’s time to address the *elephant* in this room.’ She waved her fork in the air, looking up at Van and Lottie. “Which is why you two decided to lie to everyone. Jackie told us why she thought you were keeping her hidden,” Shauna slipped a hand into Jackie’s, letting out a relieved breath when Jackie squeezed back, “but clearly she didn’t have the whole truth. And I wanna know. Jackie,” Nat locked eyes with her, “no sudden movements from you. I’m too tired to hold back your bony ass right now.”

Jackie clenched her jaw. Shauna ran her thumb across the back of her hand. She hated herself for it, but relief washed over her, relief that Jackie had someone else to be angry with, someone to take the heat off of her.

“We… I’m not standing by it. I’m not saying I was right in doing it or that my reasoning made sense,” Lottie started, picking at the bandage on her arm.

Nat pried Lottie’s fingers away absentmindedly.

“We’re all pretty aware of the issues with the reasoning, Lottie,” Tai grumbled.

“It… well, I think *it* wanted her alive. It didn’t like our choice to let her die. God, I can’t believe I’m talking like this right now.” Lottie shook her head. Everyone was silent. Eerily so. No one shifted, no one breathed. Until Van put a hand on Lottie’s shoulder, and Lottie pushed forward. “The logic then was… Jackie *did* die.”

Shauna and Nat interrupted at the same time.

“What are you—”

“Wait—”

Lottie held up a hand and they both retreated into silence. Shauna instinctively pulled Jackie's hand onto her lap, untangling their fingers to feel for her pulse. It bounded there— warm skin, steady beating. Jackie let Shauna stay like that, holding her arm steady and pressing her forehead against Shauna's shoulder.

"She *was* dead. For a little bit, at least. No heartbeat. We checked," Lottie said.

Van nodded, staring into the middle distance, her eyes glazed over.

"Hang on," Misty chimed in. "When exactly did you check?"

"Once everyone else had gone inside. You and Tai were busy with Shauna. I think Akilah and Mari were, too," Van answered.

Shauna shuddered at their names. Jackie's heart started beating faster beneath her fingertips. Shauna desperately wished there was a way for her to feel the blood pulsing through Jackie's veins every second of the goddamn day.

"No pulse," Lottie confirmed again. 'We were talking about what to do with her body. Van was wiping the blood off of her— *your* blood, Shauna,' Lottie's dark eyes locked onto Shauna's own and she felt a shiver run up her spine, "and she swore she felt something in Jackie's neck. A… a flutter. We'd *checked.* So many times, we'd checked. And nothing. But Van made me feel again and… she was right. Suddenly, her heart was beating. Like she was… resurrected."

"Like *Jesus,* Lottie?" Tai asked incredulously. "Like Jackie Taylor is our very own *Jesus fucking Christ?"*

Lottie shook her head, averting her eyes.

"Tai," Van pleaded.

"I mean, people *do* technically die and come back," Misty said, shoving her glasses up. "Usually it's because of medical intervention, of course, but… it isn't completely unheard of. Hypothermia is poorly understood. Weak heartbeats can go undetected. Stranger things have happened."

"I always sort of thought I died," Jackie said quietly. Everyone's full attention snapped to her. She gave a tiny shrug. "I mean, like… maybe it was a dream, but it… it *felt* like dying."

"What dream?" Shauna asked quickly.

Jackie opened her mouth to answer, but the conversation moved on around them and she closed it, burying her face in Shauna's shoulder once more, instead.

"So, what I said before… about Jackie having too much good in her to make it. She did. I still think she did. Maybe it isn't even *good,* maybe it's silly to call it that. Connectedness to something, I guess? Like Laura Lee," Lottie rambled.

Shauna wasn't following this. She scrambled to interpret Lottie's words, but came up empty.

"I thought it was a sign, her coming back when it was just us with her. I wanted to… figure out what it wanted before we told everyone. But… once Van and I had moved her and

warmed her up and she began to wake, she…" Lottie trailed off, chewing on her lip.

"She was different," Van supplied, with a heavy sigh.

"You don't fucking say," Shauna snapped, surprising herself. She'd felt dazed for most of this conversation, clinging to the fact that Jackie was alive and warm and here with her, taking the rest in passively. But now she felt white, hot rage. "She was different after going through a near death experience and being held… fucking hostage by you two idiots?"

Jackie moved her wrist—which made Shauna's breaths grow quick and shallow—to wrap both arms around Shauna's shoulders.

"It's okay," Jackie whispered in her ear, her breath tickling her cheek.

"I get it, Shauna," Lottie said. "I understand your anger. I'm not excusing, I'm explaining. She was… darker. I don't know how else to say it. She wasn't herself. Eventually, she was. Now, she is. Then… she was different. We thought we should observe it. We didn't know what… we didn't know what she was."

Jackie's head flew off of Shauna's shoulder. Her arms fell ready at her sides, buzzing with energy. She drew herself to sit up straight and glared at Lottie, her eyes narrowed and her jaw hinged open. Shauna shifted, scooting forward a few inches, and planted her hand flat on the ground on the other side of Jackie's legs, her arm crossing in front of Jackie's torso.

"Are you…" Nat said slowly. "Are you trying to say that you thought Jackie might be some kind of, like, *zombie?* I mean… say what you mean, Lot, for fuck's sake. Cause I'm not following your witchy shit."

"Me either." Tai leaned back slightly, adding distance between herself and Van and Lottie.

"Not a zombie," Van said, rolling her eyes. "But… like, maybe something… like, if *something* helped her survive that… who was to say it didn't… linger."

"Oh, God, here we go again," Nat muttered under her breath, swinging herself up to a sitting position on Jackie's other side.

Jackie hadn't moved. Shauna wasn't sure she'd even blinked.

"Like a spirit?" Misty asked, her tone giving nothing of her opinion away. "As in, maybe a part of whatever gave her life was embedded in her somehow and changed her personality?"

"Something like that," Lottie said.

Nat scoffed. "You guys can't be fucking serious right now."

"We're not saying that's what happened, just… that's what we were trying to rule out," Van said.

"Did you?" Jackie asked, her expression unreadable.

"I… what?" Van replied nervously.

"Did you rule it out? Or did you go on thinking I was some kind of fucking witch?" Jackie spat.

“Technically, you wouldn’t really be the witch or… spirit, right? You’d be more like a medium. Or possessed. Is that the gist?” Misty asked, her eyes flitting between Van and Lottie.

“I think you’re you, Jack,” Van said softly. “I think we were just… trying to figure shit out.”

Jackie shook her head, pursed her lips. “Whatever,” she breathed.

“Jackie sort of… she started it all, if you think about it,” Lottie explained quickly, shoring herself up for something.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Shauna snapped.

Her body shook but she remained fixed in place, her arm still acting as a barrier between Jackie and the rest of the room. Jackie gently gripped her wrist, rubbing a thumb back and forth across her skin.

“The seance was her idea,” Van said. “Doomcoming… her idea, too. The way we saw it, Jackie started it all. Lottie just… interpreted it.”

“You’re out of your fucking minds if you think I was trying to start some… occult bullshit!” Jackie rasped. “I was a *kid* trying to distract my friends from their impending fucking death!”

“We never thought you were *trying* to start anything, Jackie,” Lottie said. “That’s sort of the point.”

Shauna had never connected those dots. Never considered how each step further into… the dark shit had been brought on by one of Jackie’s ideas. In the beginning, anyway. Before she was gone.

Shauna still thought Van and Lottie were out of their fucking minds.

“If we’re considering the possibility that Jackie did have some sort of *connection* with that world,” Misty mused, “who’s to say it ever… broke?”

“Jesus, Misty,” Nat sighed.

“We are not considering anything of the fucking sort!” Shauna snapped, glaring at her.

Misty shrunk back, holding her hands up in apology. “We’re just floating ideas here, that’s all,” she said delicately.

“Yeah, well,” Shauna said, “stop floating yours, Quigley.”

“This is ridiculous,” Jackie chimed in. ‘Because, okay, objectively? Me?’ She waved her hands up and down her body. “Least culty among us.”

“Objectively,” Van said, “the giant scar from your literal blood sacrifice argues otherwise.”

“Objectively,” Jackie spat back before anyone else could interject, pointing at her scar and fuming at Van, “this was a last ditch effort, influenced by a trauma response, not so passive suicidality, and being lied to and held basically *captive* while my *bitch* of a best friend was actively dying!”

“Okay, um…” Shauna tilted her head at Jackie.

Jackie placed her hand on top of Shauna’s and squeezed. “I don’t have it in me right now to listen to you pretend like you weren’t a bitch.”

“Fair,” Shauna mumbled.

“Guys,” Tai said sharply, staring down at her phone. “Listen to this… *short-term rental home burned to ground in apparent case of arson. No casualties, motives unknown at this time, police encouraging anyone who might have information to come forward.”*

“No… no casualties?” Jackie asked.

“That’s what it says,” Tai said, her eyes wide as she scrolled through her phone quickly. “That’s what they all say. No injuries, no deaths, nothing.”

“Is that… but… you said the bones would be found for sure, right?” Shauna said.

“They should’ve been. It doesn’t… the fire doesn’t…” Jackie trailed off, rubbing her eyes like it might help her to understand.

“So,” Misty said quietly, “either someone moved the evidence after the fire burnt out or… someone is keeping word from getting out.”

“Fucking hell,” Nat groaned.

“They weren’t really fighting back. I mean, they threw some hits and everything, but nothing substantial. They weren’t afraid.” Van bounced her leg and ran her fingers through her hair roughly. “I thought it was fucking bizarre even as it was happening. They just sort of… let us kill them.”

“You think they wanted us to kill them,” Shauna whispered, loud enough that everyone could hear. Her blood felt like ice in her veins.

Another series of knocks on the door—they all jumped.

“Delivery, here! Someone sent quite a few lovely bouquets up to the front desk.”

It was Nat who stood and crossed the room, her hands shaking at her sides. She pulled the door back to reveal another employee, pushing the same type of cart the cakes had come on, flower arrangements balanced precariously on its shelves.

“Rooms 306, 308, and 311. That’s all you ladies, right?” he asked cheerily. “Big birthday celebration, I hear! Someone was bummed they couldn’t make it. Mind if I leave them all with you, or would you like me to bring them to your rooms?”

“Uh, here is fine,” Nat said, clearing her throat.

“Great,” the man said, “are we done with that cart? I can trade ya.”

Nat nodded, dazed, and pushed the empty cart out into the hall. The man carefully rolled the flowers into the room, and was gone as quick as he’d come.

Tai stood next, joining Nat.

“What the fuck?” Van muttered.

“Jackie,” Tai said quietly, a vase in hand.

Clear glass, a card attached to the front. Full to the brim with yellow dahlias.

Shauna and Jackie both rose shakily.

“It says *J.T., Room 306,”* Taissa said. “There’s… there’s two of them.”

Jackie took the flowers out of Tai’s hands and set them on the floor in front of her, then she turned to grab a second, identical bouquet off the cart, and dropped to her knees. Shauna followed.

“Lot…” Nat said. “There’s two for you, too. *C.M., Room 311.”*

Nat held out two vases, smaller than Jackie’s, one in each hand. They each had a few stems of bluebells flowing out the top, vases opaque white. Lottie looked like she was far away as she took them, her eyes glassy and her lips slightly parted.

“Van,” Tai murmured, walking over to her.

She held a purple vase containing a bouquet of magnolias tight to her chest, like it might jump out and attack Van if she didn’t keep it contained. She sank to the ground at Van’s side, placing the flowers in front of them gingerly.

“And, Misty,” Nat said, walking towards her with a single orchid, pure white.

Nat sat between Misty and Lottie, and rubbed her forehead.

“We should… should we open the cards?” Jackie asked, looking to Shauna for guidance. Shauna gave an almost imperceptible shrug.

“Why just the four of us?” Van asked, staring at the vase in front of her.

“Only one way to find out,” Lottie said, delicately reaching for one of the cards on her own arrangements.

They all watched, frozen in place, as Lottie plucked the small card out of its envelope.

Nat read over her shoulder, *“We thought you might enjoy these. Give N our thanks.”* She snatched the card out of Lottie’s hand, flipping it over. ‘That’s it? What the fuck?’ She grabbed the other card addressed to Lottie, ripping the envelope in her haste. “It’s the same. Identical.”

Misty opened her own card, careful not to bend the envelope. “Mine too. *Give N our thanks.”*

Jackie swallowed, staring at Shauna with such wide eyes it physically hurt her. Shauna kissed her without thinking, quick and chaste. Jackie whimpered against her lips.

“Let’s each do one,” Shauna suggested gently.

Jackie nodded.

Shauna peeled the flap of the envelope up, removing the card carefully. She read it silently —typed script on glossy cardstock, the company logo across the top.

We thought you might enjoy these. Give S our thanks.

They dropped the cards at the same time, Jackie throwing herself into Shauna’s arms. Shauna held her close, running a hand up and down her back, trying to steady her own breathing. Trying to stave off the dizziness that was creeping in.

Van and Tai sat shoulder to shoulder, gripping each other’s hands and staring open mouthed at the card in front of them.

What the actual fuck was going on?

13. she's gone

1997

“I should’ve just killed myself before she was born.”

Shauna was sobbing, clutching one of the few pillows they had. She’d been using it, on Misty’s advice, to splint her aching abdomen whenever she moved.

The delivery hadn’t gone well. The placenta had stayed, stuck and stubborn, clinging to her. A dead thing, by then. Draining the actual fucking life out of her. Misty had walked away from her as soon as the baby was born, fussing with it — her — in the corner instead, ignoring Akilah’s frantic pleas and Tai’s threats.

In the end, Akilah had reached up inside Shauna, prying the rest of the placenta out with her fingers. Akilah said she knew that much — that if it didn’t come out, she’d die for sure. Shauna had never felt pain like that before.

Blinding, punishing, unearthly pain.

It was the most focused she’d felt since Jackie died, like finally she had some room for clarity.

Jackie was gone, she was dying, the baby was here.

She repeated it to herself, laying on the bed Coach Ben had died in, listening to the tap, tap, tap of her own blood as it dripped onto the floor beneath her, hoping to make some sense of it all while she still had the chance. But Akilah slipped her arm out, coated in red up to her elbow, and Shauna started to feel woozy. She lost the thread.

It’d been three days now. Three miserable fucking days.

Jackie was still gone, she was still dying, and now the baby was too.

Shauna adjusted the pillow, struggling to remain upright in the piece of shit bed. The baby was crying too, a weak, shrill, little noise that sounded more like squeaking to Shauna.

She was too small to cry, really — to draw in a true, deep breath and spit it back out. Came early, probably. Misty had tried to get an exact number of weeks from Shauna in between contractions, as if she had any fucking clue. As if any of them did.

The scariest part — the thing that made Shauna wish she’d just gone through with the abortion — was Tai sobbing along with them.

She’d stayed with Shauna and the baby, acting as their sole caretaker after Shauna had banned Misty from the room and blanched at the memory of the delivery whenever she saw Akilah. Van helped some, but she’d taken to disappearing for long stretches of time again, looking sick with worry but explaining nothing. It drove Tai insane, even Shauna could see that through her haze.

So, the three of them were crying in the bed. Tai holding Shauna's baby, Shauna holding a pillow.

"Stop talking like that," Tai said through heaving breaths, entire body shaking. The vibrations actually seemed to soothe the baby, quieting her some. That's how backwards everything was — a newborn comforted by sobs.

"It was supposed to kill me," Shauna argued, wiping her nose on the pillowcase.

She hadn't felt dry since this happened — covered in blood, covered in snot, covered in what little milk she could produce. And baby vomit and shit and piss and both their tears , every inch of her skin saturated with this.

"I — I can't do this anymore, Shauna," Tai gasped out, eyes squeezed shut.

She seemed like she meant it, renewing Shauna's conviction that she should be dead by now.

Shauna shook her head stubbornly, even though Tai couldn't see it. Her eyes were still closed and she'd rested her temple against the baby's head — impossibly small, a few tufts of deep brown hair just at the crown.

Misty slammed into the room suddenly and Tai jumped up and Lottie held the baby and the rest was a blur for Shauna — fragmented and horrific.

A smell — meaty, sort of metallic. Sharp. Like flesh and blood. But too much blood, she thought, too much blood to be anything edible. Maybe they didn't know how to bleed meat without her.

"If you don't eat, the baby doesn't eat."

Letting herself slump over. Someone shoving her roughly to a sitting position.

Tai crying.

The baby crying.

Something warm against her lips, the smell stronger.

She shut them tight, thrashing her head.

A sharp pain in her abdomen from jerking away too roughly, and with it an opportunity for understanding.

Misty was trying to force her to eat that fucking piece of herself that Akilah had ripped out days ago.

They'd prepared her for this. Told her it was normal in a lot of cultures. That it was a good source of all the nutrients she and the baby desperately needed right now. That she was lucky they were willing to let her eat the whole thing.

Lucky.

She'd said no. No, no, a million times no. She would not be eating her own organ meats, but the rest of them were welcome to it, if that's what they really wanted. Just leave her out of it.

But here Misty was, anyway.

Sobbing hadn't worked, she couldn't run, she couldn't fight, so she screamed. For the first time since she lost her voice, she opened her mouth wide and forced it.

She didn't know if she still could until she tried it — scratchy and weak at first, but volume ricocheting up with every word. Pain tearing through her throat, distracting from the pain tearing through the rest of her.

"It was supposed to kill me!"

"Shauna, please." Tai's desperate pleas in her ear, her warm hands on her skin. Begging.

"I'm trying." Her own voice — a whimper now.

Lottie's gentle timbre: "You aren't just killing yourself, Shauna, you're… you're killing your baby."

"Jackie would want you to," Tai trying so hard — breaking her own rules, saying her name.

"She's not even here!" Shauna screaming again. "She didn't even come!"

Shauna knew, as she said it, that she'd meant it in two ways.

Jackie wasn't there because she was dead. Dead because Shauna let her be. Jackie dead when Shauna ought to be.

And, maybe to punish her for that, the Jackie she had now — ghost, hallucination, whatever — hadn't come.

Shauna had begged for her and they'd thought she meant the real Jackie and of course she did, but she knew she wouldn't get her.

Shauna was begging for the half version of Jackie she'd grown accustomed to, but even that Jackie had left her, forced her to deal with the consequences of her betrayal alone.

Shauna didn't eat. And neither did the baby.

PRESENT

"It's 1-800-fucking-flowers, Nat, sit your ass down," Tai ordered, shoving her back gently by the shoulders.

Nat was trying to tear through the door, convinced she could catch up with their stalkers.

"All you'll find is a delivery driver," Shauna added, tentatively stepping in next to Tai to help block Nat's path. "It'll be like that goodwill driver you roughed up all over again, they didn't hand deliver them. They ordered them online."

"What, like the drop, Shauna?" Nat spat. "Is your idiot husband behind this one, too? He was just here, wasn't he?" Nat swung a fist to the side sharply, striking the wall, a few feet from Shauna's head. Shauna backed away.

“Natalie, come on. There’s no way —” Shauna started to argue.

Leave it to Nat to be focused on all the wrong things right now — Shauna wanted to shake her, but she felt Jackie’s insistent fingers — digging into her hip, leading her further away — and she quieted.

“Besides,” Tai continued, as if nothing had happened, “even the driver is probably long gone by now. I’m sure these sat at the desk before they brought them up. It’s over. It’s not going to help.” She sounded sympathetic — it seemed to be pacifying Nat.

Van hadn’t moved, glued in place with her back against the wall. Her usual fidgeting had completely stilled, her skin looked even fairer. Tai was making her way towards her, still eyeing Nat.

“Will everyone just… just sit down, okay?” Tai pleaded. There was a desperation in her voice that startled Shauna, one she hadn’t heard in a long time.

“I second that. No use in acting out of panic,” Misty agreed. “There’s no more immediate danger to us here than anywhere else.” She was on her hands and knees in the center of the room — she’d placed the cards in one long line and was busying herself by setting the corresponding flower arrangements behind them.

Nat shot Tai a nasty look and huffed, but she sank down next to Lottie, who was brushing her fingers over the petals of a bluebell.

Jackie’s hand dug harder into Shauna’s hip, and she realized they were the only ones left standing. Her brain was buzzing, grappling for meaning.

6 bouquets, 4 recipients, targeting the ones who hadn’t killed anyone. It has to be that, right? Addressing me through Jackie. When I find those motherfucking —

Oh.

Oh, Jackie.

Shauna snapped back into herself, finally letting Jackie’s adamant grip guide her into spinning around.

Jackie was not okay. Being attacked, facing Jeff, lighting a fucking house on fire — she’d been relatively okay for all of that. As much as the rest of them, at least.

But now? Now she was shaking — head to toe, like she couldn’t help it. Shauna knew it was emotion, knew it was just a physical reaction to this madness, but she looked cold. Goosebumps pricking at her skin, jaw trembling, body shaking.

“Shauna?” she asked.

Her voice was too quiet. She didn’t sound like herself. Not like the girl who’d always commanded the attention of the room — team captain Jackie. Definitely not like the woman who’d waltzed into Shauna’s house like she owned the place, making herself at home while she waited to upend Shauna’s life.

This was a Jackie without a facade. She was shrinking in front of Shauna’s eyes, growing smaller, more timid, more skittish. This was the Jackie that was reduced to nothing those last

few months they spent together — becoming skin and bone while Shauna grew bigger.

“Oh, sweetie,” Shauna breathed, pulling her in.

Not baby, like when Jackie was fucking her. Not baby, like when Shauna was convincing her of something — prying her off Lottie, begging for her forgiveness. No. Sweetie, like 14 year old Jackie worried about flunking algebra. Sweetie, like 16 year old Jackie crying in her car. Sweetie, like her best friend Jackie.

Jackie immediately tangled up in her, Shauna holding her the way she’d held Shauna that very first night. Intertwined and desperate. Like Shauna could protect her from anything, just by holding her close. And just like Jeff had cleared his throat then, Misty cleared hers now. She was looking up at them expectantly, all the flowers matched to their cards now. Everyone sitting closer to each other, the circle growing smaller.

Right, sit. Tai said sit.

Shauna and Jackie lowered themselves to the ground. Jackie was still shivering and Shauna couldn’t think about anything with her shivering like that, so she dragged her into her lap and rubbed her back and focused on the warm breaths hitting her neck. Quick breaths, shallow breaths, but she’d take it. She didn’t care what the others thought — fuck everyone else.

Actually, that seemed to be the general consensus — because Van didn’t look okay either. Where Jackie had gone jittery, Van had gone eerily motionless. Shauna locked eyes with Tai. She sat with her arm wrapped around Van, pulling her into her side, fingers tangled in her hair.

Tai shook her head at Shauna and Shauna understood everything she needed to from that one little motion, nodding back.

No more of this. Not them. Not them.

“Okay, citizen detective, what the hell is this?” Nat said, tossing her head in the direction of Misty’s lineup.

“Well,” Misty chimed, seemingly unoffended by Nat’s quip, “I’ve lined them up by recipient and person mentioned. Van’s magnolias, card implicating Tai.”

A jarring sob escaped Van’s lips and Shauna’s heart dropped. Regardless of their tension, of however much Van hated her now, that pulled at Shauna. It was enough to tear her focus off of Jackie, if only for a moment. Shauna could hear, with shocking clarity, all the other times she’d witnessed Van like this — screaming as Akilah drove a needle through her skin, sobbing over Tai’s unconscious body, gulping for air on the plane ride home. Shauna buried her nose in Jackie’s hair, breathing her in, shutting out the noise.

Tai’s brow furrowed and she readjusted, legs swung out to the side, torso flush against Van’s now, trying to pull her as close as she physically could. All of their pretense, their attempts at distance, seemed to have fallen away. They were Van and Tai, again. At least, for now they were.

Van and Tai, Jackie and Shauna. Days together somehow enough to eclipse years of absence.

She let the fingers resting on Jackie's lower back slip up under the hem of her shirt, just so she could feel the warmth of her skin, as she watched Tai bow her head, whispering something to Van.

Lottie was chewing on her lip, arm extended towards Van. She didn't touch her — just let her palm rest on the floor near her leg as she watched her. Unlike Jackie, she seemed to be taking breaths that were too deep. Too slow, too much time between them.

Misty pushed forward, sparing Van a sympathetic glance.

"Next —"

"Dahlia's," Jackie interrupted, stirring in Shauna's arms.

Jackie had been uncharacteristically quiet up until this point, body shaking against Shauna as if she was sobbing, but no tears, no noise escaping her. Shauna had wondered if she'd even been listening. She twisted in Shauna's lap, facing the center of the circle now. Shauna wrapped her arms around her middle, set her chin on her shoulder. Jackie made a tiny sound that was half hum, half gasp.

"Right," Misty nodded. "Two this time, both addressed to Jackie, note implicating Shauna. Bluebells, two again, both addressed to Lottie, both implicating Natalie. And an orchid, addressed to me, implicating Nat, again."

Jackie had settled, so Shauna was playing catch up mentally. Eyes flitting between the vases, allowing herself to assume that, considering everyone else's reactions, the flowers were specific to each person.

Just as Shauna decided she had it figured out, Tai spoke. She looked focused and sharp, like Van's panic had set her into motion, whereas Shauna felt off-balance, grappling for the ability to think thoughts outside of Jackie.

"It's how many of those freaks we killed." Tai locked eyes with Shauna as she said it, like she was speaking directly to her. "I killed one, Shauna stabbed two, Nat shot three."

Bingo, Shauna thought. And: fuck.

"That's exactly what I was thinking," Misty said. "Addressed to the, um, people who didn't kill anyone that each of you, uh, prefers."

"Fucking hell," Nat muttered under her breath.

"Prefers?" Lottie repeated. "Christ."

What the fuck is going on there? Nat with both of them? With Misty? Really?

But Shauna didn't have long to ponder that disturbing image, because Misty was responding.

"I mean, yeah." She shrugged, once again looking far too calm for the situation at hand. 'I don't know what else you would call it.' Lottie scoffed. Nat ignored them both, staring at the door like someone might burst through it at any second. "Not sure what you're peeved about, seeing as you got two of Nat's and I got one."

“Oh my god, this is not a fucking competition,” Nat snapped. “This is a threat. And we’re sitting ducks. We need a plan.”

“How did they know?” Van’s strangled voice. Shauna watched the muscles in Tai’s arms tense around her.

“How did they know what?” Tai asked softly.

“The flowers,” Jackie explained. She sounded a little more normal, a little more Jackie. Shauna pressed her forehead against her temple, letting out a shaky sigh of relief. “How did they know what flowers to get?”

Van nodded grimly.

“I was wondering if they held significance to everyone.” Misty adjusted the pot holding the orchid, almost like she was choosing the best angle to display it at.

“I’m sure there’s some explanation. It’s not like… well, it’s not like anyone’s favorite flowers are some big secret, right?” Tai rambled. Van shook her head, eyes shut tight.

“Mine kind of are,” Lottie said, breaking her silence. “Nat doesn’t even… Well. I just don’t think it’s very public for me.”

Shauna had been wondering about that, too. How they could know the significance of the yellow dahlias. It was chilling, but it wasn’t like there was no possibility for a rational explanation. A text message being hacked, a conversation overheard, a —

Fuck. A journal entry being read.

Shauna’s journals, that had vanished. Turned up in Lottie’s care with a note written by Jeff attached to them. There was potential that any of the women here knew about Jackie and yellow dahlias, regardless of the journals. They’d been friends, teammates. Close.

Who was to say one of them hadn’t ordered the flowers herself? Who was to say this was an outside job?

And, fuck, if it was an outside job, who was to say their other rooms weren’t being searched right now?

“Guys, we need to check the other rooms,” Shauna said hurriedly, gently pushing Jackie forward until she slid off her lap. “What if this is a distraction? What if they’re going through our shit right now?”

Lottie blanched.

“Go check,” she said, eyes locked on Shauna. “Go.”

It seemed to click for Jackie, who sprang into action, jumping to her feet and offering Shauna a hand. Only the three of them knew about Shauna’s journals, as far as she knew. It hadn’t come up with the group yet. Thank god.

“Nat…” Tai fretted, unwilling to move away from Van, who was clinging to the edge of her blouse.

“I got it,” Nat replied quickly. “I’ll check, it’s okay.”

“I’ll go with you,” Misty said, following Nat to the door. “None of us should go anywhere alone.”

The pairs headed out, Jackie’s hand still in Shauna’s. Shauna glanced back at Tai one more time — Van in her embrace, Lottie resting a hand on Van’s calf now, thumb moving in soothing circles.

“We’ve got to get the fuck out of here.” Shauna was packing — running around their room and grabbing their things, throwing them into whoever’s bag was closest without sorting through any of the mess.

Nothing had been disturbed, as far as she could tell. Which meant that was likely the case for Nat and Tai’s room as well. The group would be expecting them back soon — they didn’t have long.

Jackie was still standing by the door — immobile, tracking her movements with wide eyes.

“Jax, start packing. Come on,” Shauna snapped. She’d meant for it to come out softer — sweet but stern, the tone Jackie always took when she delicately insisted someone get their shit together. Instead it came out shaky, almost annoyed.

Jackie shook her head for a full ten seconds — slow, small movements at first, building to sharp jerking motions, frantic and exaggerated, until her hair was swinging behind her.

Shauna was almost done rounding up their things — she’d just shoved her journals into the bottom of Jackie’s bag, beneath a tangle of clothes and chargers and toiletries. She zipped the overstuffed suitcase quickly, before closing the distance between them.

“Jax?” she questioned, as she watched Jackie creep closer to panic. Shauna stilled Jackie’s head, holding it between her hands.

“No,” Jackie whispered.

“What —” Shauna started.

“No,” she repeated. “We can’t leave.”

Shauna stared at her in disbelief.

“We have to leave. What are you talking about? Were you paying attention just now?” Shauna asked.

“Of course I was paying attention.” Jackie pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. “I’ve spent my whole life running. My whole life being people I’m not. I’m tired of running. I didn’t…” She let her arms drop suddenly, fists clenched at her sides, still avoiding Shauna’s face. “Didn’t do this, didn’t come back just to turn and run again. We have to face this.” Jackie’s voice was tight and clipped, raspy inhales punctuating her words.

Everything they’d gone through so far, and nothing had made her visibly afraid like this. This was different — it was a continuation of the breakdown that began back with the group, but there was a new edge to it.

What the fuck changed?

“Jackie, Jax, look at me.” Shauna scratched at her scalp softly, drawing little circles. “It could be any of them. They knew who killed who. They knew about the flowers. Probably, I mean… We can’t be sure, but that’s the simplest explanation, right? Okay? It — it could be any of them.”

Even Tai? Could it be Tai?

Shauna didn’t want to think about that. If it were only her life at stake, she’d be singing a different tune. She wouldn’t doubt Tai. Doubting her would be giving in to her trauma, to her baggage, in a way Shauna would’ve resisted. It would’ve been crossing a line.

But it wasn’t just Shauna’s life anymore. It was Jackie’s. Shauna loved Tai, she truly did — in a straightforward and honest way, a way that was rare for her. But if it was a question of Tai harming Jackie? Well, Shauna would rip her to pieces, love be damned.

“We have to go,” Shauna repeated. “We don’t have time for this, sweetie. It’s okay. Just… We just need to get out of here.”

Jackie was shaking and batting Shauna’s hands away and wailing in a terrified sort of frustration and what about this is the scariest fucking thing we’ve done this week?

“Yeah, and then what, Shauna? Over 25 fucking years and we get what? Five days together?” Jackie clutched at her chest. “Not even five days, because most of them were spent doing fucking gross, murdery, shit and — and fighting and talking to other people. Hours. It’s more like hours. That’s it? That’s all we get?” Jackie gasped, gripping the front of her own shirt now.

Oh.

There it is.

Shauna tried to reach for her, but she stepped back. Shauna didn’t push.

“Just slow down. Nobody’s taking me away from —”

“Oh, really? Nobody’s taking you away from me? How about the husband, Shauna?” Jackie said, hands on her hips. “How about him? Seemed like that’s exactly what he was trying to do this morning.”

“Baby, I —” Shauna tried, tentatively grasping Jackie’s wrist in hopes of pulling her closer. Jackie immediately wrenched away.

“No! Don’t you dare baby me.” Jackie pointed a trembling finger at her. “You have a husband and a kid you’ll have to go to, if we run from this. Running doesn’t leave time for things like divorce and custody hearings. So, where does that leave me, huh?”

“Holy shit. Slow down. Please, I’m begging you to slow down. I didn’t know you were worried about that, I wasn’t even thinking about that,” Shauna said.

“Yeah, well that’s just great. Of course you’re not even thinking about it.” Jackie rolled her eyes. “Think about it now. Go ahead,” Jackie demanded, stepping towards Shauna.

“Where am I in that picture? Do you wanna keep me around, too? You want me to be your… your fucking mistress? Seems like you’re used to having someone on the side. Seems like that’s your default, right?”

“Jackie,” Shauna begged, tears hot on her cheeks. She couldn’t think, she just needed a second to think. She hadn’t considered what running meant beyond getting Jackie out of this — safe and alive and as whole as she could possibly be. She couldn’t watch her break down like this, be afraid like this.

Jackie didn’t let up.

“Is that what you want?” Jackie laid a hand on the center of Shauna’s chest, as if she was going to push her. She didn’t, though. Just kept it there — fingers splayed on Shauna’s breastbone, holding her back and reaching for her all at once. “You — you wanna keep me around until you get sick of me and decide to toss me aside?”

“I said we, Jackie! I meant it!” Shauna yelled, finally breaking, covering Jackie’s hand with her own before she could pull it away. ‘Of course I meant together. You and me. You’re getting… you’re getting mean, Jax. I — I get why you’re upset, I get it.’ Jackie’s face softened just a bit. She let Shauna wrap her fingers around her own. “But I need you to slow down. Please. Because I’m not… I’m not talking about us being apart. Not even for a second do I want that. I lo—”

Jackie’s face might’ve softened, but her words hadn’t.

“Yeah and how do you propose we make that work? You wanna what? Flee to Canada and set up shop? Think Jeff will be okay with me moving in with you guys? Think it’ll be like some fucked up brady bunch bullshit?”

“I don’t… I haven’t thought about the details yet —”

“Well I have. And I don’t see how the hell I fit, if we don’t face this thing. I thought we’d have more time,” Jackie’s voice hitched. She covered her mouth and spoke muted words, broken by her sobs, “I thought… I thought it would take you longer than this to get me out of your system.”

“God, please. Please will you let that go,” Shauna cried. “Jeff was pissed and I was being stupid and just… Just saying shit and I didn’t mean it like that and please, can we just go?”

“How am I supposed to trust you when you say that? You… you’ve always lied to me. Always.” Jackie wrapped her arms around her stomach and Shauna started seriously considering whether she could just throw her over her shoulder and carry her down to the car without someone stopping her. “And you have a family. You’re married. It’s so much worse now and I just thought if… if we figured this shit out and could be normal people for once in our fucked up lives that maybe you’d pick me. Just —”

“I would leave them,” Shauna interrupted.

“What?” Jackie looked stunned, head tilted and jaw slack. She gaped at Shauna, scanning her face for clues.

“I would leave them before I left you. Jeff and Callie,” Shauna said simply. “Right now. To go with you. To be with you. In a fucking… heartbeat.” Her voice was calm and unwavering.

Admitting this, finally putting it into words instead of trying to hide it, felt better than she'd thought it would. A weight off her shoulders.

"No you wouldn't," Jackie whispered. "Don't say things you don't mean."

"I would. It's not right. I know it's not right. I know I'm sick. I know I'm a horrible mother. I know." Shauna gripped Jackie's upper arms, and she let her — finally. "But it's true. You wanted the truth from me? Here it is. I want to figure out how to do this right. But I am never, ever going anywhere without you, unless you make me. I'm in this with you, until the second you tell me to fuck off."

Jackie stepped forward, leaning against Shauna.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Shauna let one arm fall to her waist and raised the other to the back of her neck, as Jackie fisted her hands into the back of Shauna's shirt.

"You wouldn't leave your daughter," she insisted gently.

"Why would I say that, if it weren't true?" Shauna asked. "It makes me sound horrible. It is horrible."

"Just… we'll figure it out," Jackie replied, nudging Shauna's cheek with her nose.

"Yeah," Shauna mumbled. Jackie pressed a kiss to her jaw before resting her forehead against her cheek.

"We will. It's not either, or, baby." Shauna's body relaxed at that, at being called baby again. 'I'm sorry I got mean,' Jackie apologized. "I was scared, but I shouldn't —"

"No," Shauna cut her off. "No, it's… It's okay. It was fair, honestly."

Jackie kissed her — hands gripping her shirt at the waist, eyes red-rimmed from tears — and it made Shauna think of that first sober kiss, the one out there. She pulled away quickly. Jackie looked wounded, pouting up at her.

"It's… Nothing. Just c'mere," Shauna amended, guiding Jackie's arms up to their usual spot around her neck. Jackie quirked a brow, but didn't say anything. Shauna circled her hips and drew her closer, kissing her long enough and deep enough that she seemed to forget all about the awkward shuffle.

"I won't ever tell you to fuck off," Jackie promised, breaking the kiss.

"I hope not," Shauna sighed.

"I mean it, Shauna. I won't," Jackie repeated. "But we still can't leave."

"What?" It was Shauna's turn to sound confused. She thought she'd addressed Jackie's concerns, convinced her they'd figure things out. "But —"

"It isn't just about us. No matter how pissed I am at them, I'm not leaving Van and Lottie. And you're not leaving Tai. We're not gonna be those people." Jackie was playing with Shauna's hair again, brushing it back off her shoulders. "We're not leaving Nat. Not even

Misty. They're our problem, honey. We all… we're all each other's crosses to bear. We're not leaving."

"I'd just like to point out that I told you the dyke drama was relevant and I was on the money, clearly." Nat was leaning against the foot of the bed in the main room of Lottie, Misty, and Van's suite, arms crossed against her chest, a flask resting against her thigh. Lottie sat in the bed behind her, cross legged, lips pursed as she glared at the back of Nat's head.

Jackie and Shauna had come back to find the rest of the women there and waiting for them. No one questioned the length of their disappearance, everyone wrapped up in their own thoughts.

Van and Tai hadn't moved from their spot against the wall — Van still seemed shaken, but she was less entangled with Tai now. She kept batting at her cheeks in frustration, wiping away any tears that escaped. Her other hand rested on Tai's thigh, tensing intermittently. Tai's arm was draped over her shoulders — Shauna watched her fingers trail mindlessly over Van's collarbone.

Misty had moved the evidence up against the wall, out of their way. She was perched in the desk chair, scanning her phone for any more coverage of the fire. She seemed the least phased, but that was par for the course.

Jackie and Shauna also sat on the floor, shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand. Also less recklessly intertwined, now that some time had passed since the initial shock. There was only so much leeway before Nat would start giving them shit for being on top of each other.

"You were right, want an award?" Lottie asked, voice all syrup-sweet. Nat tilted her head straight back, letting it fall onto the mattress so she could look up at Lottie.

"Maybe," she smirked. Lottie rolled her eyes and shoved her head forward again.

"Okay," Misty interjected briskly, "the first decision we need to make is whether we still stay here tonight. It's almost 8 and we're going to need to leave soon if we want to avoid another late night check in."

"The first decision we need to make is whether we keep traveling together like this," Tai argued. Van shot her a confused look and Tai started rubbing her shoulder more purposefully in response.

"We've been over this, Tai," Nat groaned. "We stick together. We finish this."

"Tai has a point, though," Shauna said quietly. Jackie's hand flinched in hers and Shauna felt her cheek burn under her gaze, but she didn't dare glance at her.

"Why would we split up now? What's changed?" Misty asked genuinely.

"Oh, gosh, I don't know," Shauna said sarcastically. "Maybe getting thank you cards for murdering people from someone who knows us really fucking well is a turning point? How about someone threatening our —" Her voice cracked and she petered out. Jackie dropped her head to Shauna's shoulder and sighed before speaking.

“We are not splitting up. We’re stronger together.”

Shauna shook her head. Jackie just squeezed her hand.

“As of now, who wants to stay together?” Lottie inquired. “Raise your hands.”

Jackie, Van, Nat, and Misty all did.

“And apart?” Lottie asked, raising her own hand, as Tai and Shauna did the same.

“We lose,” she shrugged, sinking back onto the bed so that she was laying flat now, as if her contribution to the conversation was complete.

“And since when is this a democracy?” Shauna mumbled under her breath.

“Since Jackie’s back and you can’t threaten us like you used to,” Van muttered — her first real sentence of the night.

“Van,” Jackie warned, raising her eyebrows at Van’s sharp tone.

“Okay, this isn’t getting us anywhere. Shauna, we were outvoted. We go along with it,” Tai declared. ‘For now,’ she added, when Nat nodded a little too enthusiastically. “We all reserve the right to split if we need to. This might be a democracy, but it isn’t a prison sentence.”

“Fair enough,” Jackie conceded. Shauna fully intended to exercise that right to bail, if Jackie would let her, but she acquiesced anyway, nodding her agreement.

“So it’s settled, we stick together.” Misty announced. “Now, back to what I was saying before —”

“We should just stay here,” Lottie said with a sigh. “What difference will it make? We haven’t been careful. Whoever this is, they’re going to know where we are no matter what. Might as well skip the drive.”

“See…” Nat mused, “I don’t know about that. Those room service people give me the fucking creeps. They were acting funny, I don’t like it. We don’t know how deep this goes.”

Jackie laughed. “Of course they were acting funny, wouldn’t you?”

Everyone faced her, except Lottie who was still staring at the ceiling.

“We’re the weird ones, guys. Seven bruised and battered women checking in at 2 am? Paying in cash? Of course they’re odd around us, they’re probably talking in the break room about the weirdos on the third floor,” Jackie explained.

“She has a point,” Tai said. “Besides, we don’t really know who we can trust, do we? No matter where we go. I hate to be the one to say it, but… can we even… I mean, do you all seriously trust…” Tai cut herself off, eyeing Van wearily, afraid to finish this sentence in front of her.

“Everyone in this room?” Shauna supplied. Tai nodded carefully. “No,” Shauna said simply.

“See,” Nat snapped, “you two think you’re so smart, but you’re the fucking problem. That’s exactly what they want — us accusing each other of shit. If anyone here wanted anyone else dead they would’ve done it by now. We’ve had plenty of opportunities.”

“Death isn’t the only threat,” Lottie murmured. Nat ignored her.

“Tai,” Van croaked, looking at her lap, “that’s just… That isn’t helpful. We should trust each other. We need each other.”

Tai worried her lip, eyes apologetic, but she didn’t say anything.

“Be fair to them,” Jackie said suddenly. “They’re trying. I don’t think I can say I fully trust everyone right now, either. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t stick together.”

Van and Jackie were communicating without words. Shauna and Tai glanced at each other, Tai’s eyes narrowed. Shauna shrugged. It was something Shauna didn’t have a hold of yet — Van and Jackie’s friendship.

“How am I supposed to trust you right now?” Jackie spoke again, responding to something only she had gathered from the silence between them. Her voice quivered and she was swallowing at nothing again. Shauna ran her thumb across the back of her hand.

Lottie finally sat up. “We kept you alive, Jackie. I’m not just talking about back then. Van especially. Does that count for anything?” she implored.

Van stayed silent, inching closer to Tai. Shauna couldn’t think of a word for the look on her face. Something like shame, only worse. Resigned. It made Shauna feel… victorious, for a second, vindicated, before she caught a glimpse of the tears pooling in Van’s eyes and her own guilt set in.

“Do you know how much I’ve already forgiven you two for, Lot?” Jackie asked quietly.

“I do. But now isn’t the time to… It’s just, we… well, who knows what could’ve happened if we hadn’t done what we did, right? Can’t we just be grateful nothing worse happened?” Lottie said.

“We know what did happen, though,” Nat murmured in Shauna’s direction, “and it was awful.” She seemed truly drunk to Shauna for the first time today — eyes unfocused, words uninhibited.

Shauna drew in a shaky breath and tried to tune it all out. Tried to maintain control.

“That’s not —” Lottie started.

“Lot,” Nat said softly. “You can’t change the past, but you can own up to it. We all made mistakes.”

“She’s right,” Misty said. Her eyes were on Shauna now, too. Everyone’s were, actually, and Shauna was starting to feel dizzy again. “We all watched Shauna fall apart. It was horrifying. I still don’t understand how you two thought whatever was going on with Jackie was worth that.”

Shauna clawed desperately at Jackie’s hand, trying to ground herself. Trying not to go away. Her heart was pounding in her ears. She swayed a little on the spot, lightheaded, her grip on Jackie probably painful at this point.

“Shauna?” Jackie asked, tilting her face towards her own with a hand under her chin. Shauna tried to respond, but she couldn’t force the words out.

Misty kept going. “Was worth her… well, quite frankly, losing her mind.”

Shauna tried to focus on Jackie — her pretty eyes moving rapidly, fingers digging into Shauna’s shoulders, lips forming words Shauna couldn’t hear. What Shauna did hear, however, was the next question to tumble out of Misty Quigley’s mouth.

“Was it really worth her losing the baby like that?”

And with that, Shauna was gone.

“Shauna?” Jackie repeated, shaking her shoulders a little. Shauna’s eyes were glassy, her jaw just barely slack — lips parted a few centimeters. Jackie got on her knees, leaning over Shauna and palming her cheek. Her heart was hammering against her ribs, the panic she’d worked so hard to subdue rising again.

Jackie vaguely heard Lottie’s response to Misty’s question.

Why did she ask that question, why would she ask that question, what the hell is wrong with that woman?

“We told you earlier,” Lottie said. “She was different, we didn’t know what would be best to —”

Van choked on her breath, and Jackie felt her heart sink impossibly deeper.

“Shauna?” Tai’s panicked voice cut in. “Jackie, what’s going on?”

“No, no, no,” Van gasped out. Jackie wished she could turn around, check on her, try and prevent what she knew was coming, but she couldn’t. Because Shauna, her Shauna, was acting like a statue, frozen in front of her.

“Misty, why the fuck would you bring that up?” Tai yelled.

“Shauna, honey,” Jackie tried again, hands roaming over her face, shoulders, waist, hands — searching for the spot that would undo this. Shauna didn’t react.

“Oh, god,” Jackie whispered, biting back the cries bubbling in her throat. She needed to be strong right now, she needed —

Van was crying again, tone pitching up.

Okay, you can do this. They’re both panicking at the same time and it really isn’t ideal and Shauna looks like a goddamn effigy right now, but — But you can do this.

“She’s gone, guys,” Nat announced to the room, leaning over Jackie’s shoulder to check Shauna’s eyes. Misty sighed audibly, as if she had any reason to feel put out right now, as if it was her… person hanging on by a thread. Jackie heard someone shuffle behind her.

“Van, baby, wait —” Tai protested.

People, Jackie thought, her people. Plural. Jackie gave Shauna a once over, just to make sure it was safe to take her eyes off of her for a moment — unsure what exactly she was checking for, but confident she’d recognize it if she saw it.

She turned, and thank God she did, because Van was wrecked. It was too late to intervene, she was going to go through every stage of this now — the panic, the confusion, the fatigue.

All of it.

Van tried to stand, one foot in front of her, pushing herself off the ground. Tai was the picture of concern, trying to calm her, trying to keep her there, which was good. She needed to be kept close. Van's first instinct was always to run — to find somewhere to hide when this happened. Jackie would find her sometimes, curled up in some corner, trying to shrink herself.

Tai was doing it all wrong, though, her fingers wrapped around Van's wrist, pulling her back to the ground. Van yelped, even as she relented, falling in next to Tai again. Tai flinched at the sound and Jackie saw red.

Red, like the nail polish That Woman always wore. The one that had held Van's arms down by her sides, backed her up against the wall, said such horrible, horrible things to her. Red nails digging into fair skin when she thought Jackie had gone home for the night, but she hadn't, she'd seen it and —

And this was Tai. This wasn't That Woman — it was Tai and she was trying. She loved Van, no matter what, she loved her.

"Van, it's okay. It's okay, you're okay," Jackie called out, over her shoulder. "Tai, you can't grab her like that! Her wrists. Don't pull her around like that, she's —"

"I'm not hurting her, Jackie, Jesus," Tai snapped back. And it seemed like she'd been reminded of Shauna now, because she added: "Stop touching Shauna so much. She doesn't like to be touched when she's like this, it makes it worse."

Jackie frowned, easing off of Shauna a bit — leaving a gap between them instead of pressing against her, hands still roving her body. Still trying to find the touch that would fix her. There was always a way to break Shauna out of her trances. Tugging at her hair lazily, pulling her into a hug, scratching her back. Always a way for Jackie to bring her back to herself when she'd been zoning out. This was that, right? A heightened version of that, but still. This was her Shauna. Jackie knew her. She'd figure it out.

Tai had half-heartedly taken Jackie's advice in return, dropping Van's wrist, instead trying to soothe her by rubbing her lower back. Van sat with her knees drawn up into her chest and Tai was cross legged beside her, giving her space. Enough space that Van could push herself off the ground and bolt, if she tried again.

"No, not no touch! No wrist touch," Jackie yelled. She tangled her fingers in Shauna's hair, leaned a little closer to her again. "Hug her, Tai, just fucking hug her!"

Tai quickly complied, wrapping Van in her arms, pulling her close. Jackie faced Shauna again.

Were her pupils this dilated before? Is she having a fucking stroke or something?

In the background now: Lottie crying, Misty rambling something off to Nat.

"Jackie, back off!" Tai demanded.

"I fucking know her, Taissa!" Jackie spat.

Jackie pressed her upper body to Shauna's, wrapping her in a hug, forehead against her temple. Pressed to her like how they danced, like how they whispered to each other at parties, like how they held each other after they fought.

"Shauna, baby, it's okay. You're okay, just… come back now, okay?" Jackie pleaded.

At the same time, Tai chose to comment again: "It's been nearly 25 years, Taylor. I think you missed some chapters."

Jackie pulled back — she didn't want to startle Shauna by raising her voice in her ear, but she had to yell to be heard over Van's sobs — the ones that were more like whistles than cries.

"I could say the same to you over there, Turner."

"Enough!" Nat shouted. Jackie and Tai both gave her their attention, startled by her sudden involvement. She stood in the center of the room, one hand outstretched to each of them. "No one is thinking right now. Both of you, just shut the fuck up for a minute."

They did — Lottie's cries seemed louder now that Jackie and Tai were quiet.

"Lottie, your whole job is to stop crying. That's it. Please. I can't think when you're crying like that and you're fine, okay?" Nat's timbre started out sharp, but quickly melted down to one of smooth consolation. Lottie sniffled, pulling a pillow in front of herself and burying her face in it. She was watching Van, wordlessly pleading with Nat.

"I know," Nat assured her. "I know. Jackie, listen. Ease up a little, yeah? We've seen this a lot, okay?"

"But, I —" Jackie started, frowning up at her.

"I understand where you're coming from," Nat persisted. "Do you know how many parties I walked Shipman home from because she did her spooky, zoned out, dead quiet act? But this is different, okay? She —" Nat paused abruptly, cocking her head to the side as she stared, open mouthed, at Shauna.

Terror ripped through Jackie as she whipped back around, half expecting to see something horrific — blood trickling out of Shauna's ears or her skin tinged blue — but it wasn't anything like that.

Shauna was no longer staring straight ahead — she was looking at Nat. Not looking at her, really. There was still something very wrong. But she'd tipped her head up and to the side, like she was listening to what Nat was saying.

"Shauna? Baby?" Jackie asked, positioning herself in front of Shauna's face again, hands running up and down her arms.

"Holy shit," Nat said quietly. Shauna's head turning to her again, still no change in her vacant expression.

"Tai —" Nat began, but she didn't have to say anything else, because Van provided them with the confirmation they needed.

Her cries ricocheted towards desperate gulps for air, and Jackie knew she needed to deal with that too, she did, but every other thought fell from her mind when Shauna's head swiveled towards the sound.

"I've got you," Tai murmured against the crown of Van's head. "I've got you, sweetheart." Van pulled her knees closer to her chest, allowing herself to lean more fully on Tai, halfway to being in her lap. Tai guided Van's head to her shoulder, stroking a hand steadily through her hair. Jackie had never once heard Taissa call Van sweetheart, wasn't sure she'd heard her call Van pet names at all, but she was glad she did — Van needed that. She needed Tai like that right now.

"She has that… that sort of half-mode, right?" Tai asked, resting her chin on the top of Van's head. She was trying to play it cool, but she became visibly unsettled when Shauna's gaze fell on her. "Where she can hear us, she just can't say anything? It's… it's probably just that," she reasoned, squeezing Van a little tighter.

"I don't remember it looking like this, though," Misty remarked, pushing her glasses up.

"No… it's… I think… I think she learned to follow the conversation, maybe," Nat offered. 'She's fully gone, but she's looking at us, technically, I guess. Like… moving her head appropriately.' Nat stepped side to side as she spoke, seemingly captivated by the way Shauna followed her movements. "Fuck, man… It's like… This is so much creepier than just staring at the wall. She's like a haunted doll or some shit."

"Natalie!" Jackie sobbed, unable to hold it in anymore. "Help me."

"Right, yeah. Just sit next to her, okay? Here," Nat ordered, guiding Jackie with hands on her shoulders. "Yeah, like that. Now just hold her hand or something. Something small."

Jackie nodded, head throbbing, entire body itching to wrap itself around Shauna. She resisted, threading her persistent fingers through Shauna's limp ones, and focused instead on controlling her cries enough to speak calmly to Shauna without devolving.

"Good Jackie, that's really good," Nat said, before turning to face Tai, Van trembling in her arms.

Jackie had a clear view of them now, tangled together the way she wished she and Shauna were.

Let her come back to me, let her come back to me, she begged the universe. Jackie always prayed to anyone who might listen — she didn't discriminate between gods or energies or creatures of folklore. She would take any help she could get.

Van was going to hyperventilate. Jackie could hear that now, whistling cries turned wheezing pleas for oxygen. She'd been worried about that — a current tugging at her beneath her fear for Shauna, vying for her attention.

She opened her mouth to say it out loud, but Nat beat her to it.

"Oh fuck, Van!" She gasped. "Alright, Jesus fuck, hyperventilation… Misty, aren't you a goddamn nurse? Can't you do something about that?"

"Hold on," Misty said quickly, running into the other room.

“Misty where the fuck —” Nat hollered after her.

“Van, baby, look at me,” Taissa begged, trying to grab her face, “you have to breathe, baby __”

“Supplies,” Misty chirped back to Nat. “Give me two seconds!”

“Jesus,” Nat muttered, running a hand through her hair. “Tai, stop that, sit behind her,” she ordered.

Thank god, Jackie thought.

“What?” Tai asked, distracted by Van’s rapid breaths.

“Listen to me. For fuck’s sake,” Nat said firmly. “Sit behind her.” She said it slow, like Tai was a toddler that needed hand-holding.

Tai was stunned into compliance, shifting to sit behind Van, pulling her back flush to her chest, wrapping trembling arms around her middle. Van’s breaths quickened instead of slowing. Nat knelt next to them.

Not like that.

“Move your arms, Tai,” Nat said, much gentler. Taissa looked like she might cry. Jackie knew she wouldn’t. Unlike Jackie, Taissa would hold it together. But seeing Tai near tears was basically as startling as the real thing.

“Here, like this,” Nat positioned Tai’s arms on top of Van’s instead. Tai instinctively laced their fingers together. She looked at Nat questioningly, as Van’s chest started rising and falling a little slower.

“We’ve been friends since we were five, Tai,” Nat shrugged. She let go of Tai’s arms, satisfied with the position, and then let her hand hover over Van’s hair, as if she were deciding whether or not to tuck a lock behind her ear.

Jackie felt a flood of relief. Had she expected her reprieve to come in the form of a visibly drunk Natalie Scatorccio? Absolutely not. But she would take it. They had her — Tai and Nat. They had Van. Jackie could focus on Shauna.

Jackie turned towards her, so that she was staring at her profile. Just a glimpse of her deep brown eyes. The curve of her still so fucking sweet cheeks — baby face Shauna used to complain, while Jackie traced her pointer finger along the apple of them, absolutely enamored. The line of her nose — Jackie used to trace that, too, laughing when she accidentally brushed Shauna’s eyelashes with the side of her hand, making Shauna squirm. Her lips — full and pulled down into a pout or quirked to the side in thought, most of the time — or pressed against Jackie’s, against her neck, against her chest.

Hers.

Jackie hadn’t seen Shauna in 25 years and 2 months. She knew exactly how long it’d been. Everyone kept saying almost 25 years, and for the rest of them that was true. Not for Jackie and Shauna, though — for them it was over 25 years. She’d started counting the days when she was down there. Didn’t have anything better to do.

She counted when she got back, too. Milestones . Six years apart — the amount of time they'd lived before they met. Twelve years apart — the length of their entire friendship. 18 years apart — doubling their age.

25 years and 2 months, followed by just five days. But it only took five days for Jackie to realize, with such intense clarity, that Shauna still belonged to her, and she still belonged to Shauna. She hadn't planned to do this, really. To fall so hard, so fast. To yield to her like this. But it was Shauna. And Shauna could have whatever pieces of Jackie she needed.

Jackie tried talking to her again — close enough now for her nose to brush against Shauna's cheek as she spoke.

"Hi, baby," she whispered. Shauna's head did that same automated swivel, but with Jackie's face pressed to hers, blocking her from turning further, it felt so much more natural — like Shauna was just pitching towards Jackie's voice.

"I know you haven't been gone all that long. Not really, but… I miss you. Do you think you could try and come back now?" Jackie cupped the other side of Shauna's face, brushing her cheek with a gentle thumb. "I'm a little worried about you." Tears streamed down Jackie's face, dripping off her jaw and onto her chest, but she sounded calm. She managed that much.

Misty was back, a paper bag in her hand. Tai's focus drifted off of her and onto Jackie, who she scolded immediately. "Jackie, we said to back off. Please."

"Tai," Nat said quickly. "I think she can get away with a little more. She's Jackie. We weren't. Maybe she's right. Maybe she can get a little close—"

Van sounded worse, suddenly, which didn't feel possible, even though Jackie knew it was.

"I know, Van, it's okay—"

"—you're alright, just hold on—"

They have her, you have Shauna. It's okay. She's okay.

Jackie took advantage of their distraction, assessing Shauna. She seemed slightly more present. Maybe it was wishful thinking on Jackie's part, but she saw it as a window of opportunity — this subtle change coinciding with the distracted movement of the others around Van.

Jackie decided to take Nat's words and run with them.

She shifted, throwing a leg over both of Shauna's and settling herself in her lap. She was careful not to pin down Shauna's immobile arms, picking them up and placing them on Shauna's thighs, just behind herself. It was almost like Shauna was holding her, arms brushing Jackie's hips. Jackie took a deep breath and settled in, circling Shauna's neck and pressing against her.

"Jackie Taylor, that is not what she—" Tai began.

"Just leave it. They're okay. I think they're okay," Nat soothed. "Just focus on Van. I've got them."

Tai seemed to surrender, quieting. Jackie just closed her eyes — breathed Shauna in while she waited her out. Listened to the rest of them buzzing around Van in the background.

Tai's voice was a quiet rumble, words meant for Van, too quiet for Jackie to pick up on.

"Breathe into this," Misty said calmly. A rustle of paper. "There you go, try to slow it down some."

"Is that even real medicine?" Tai's voice was louder now, projecting across the small room.

Yes, Taissa, Jackie thought.

"Yes, Taissa," Misty said.

Jinx.

"Can you hear them?" Jackie asked Shauna softly, like she was just curious. Like the answer didn't change anything. "Can you hear me?"

"Do you think I'm just pretending to be a nurse?" Misty gave a forced chuckle.

"Wouldn't put it past you," Tai grumbled.

"I know what I'm doing. Would you like me to teach you about acid-base balance, or would you like to trust me so I can help her get better?" Misty deadpanned.

"Can't you give her anything?" Tai's voice broke, just enough for Jackie to notice.

Oh, honey. She'll be okay.

"She'll be okay," Misty echoed. And, yikes, Jackie very much wanted to stop thinking the same thoughts as Misty Quigely.

"Wait 'til I tell you about this," she whispered to Shauna, nudging her cheek with her nose. "You're gonna give me so much shit."

Behind her, Van's breathing was muffled, but she was still crying, hard.

"You don't have anything to calm her down?" Tai was in anguish — it was thick on her tongue now.

"I don't carry xanax or ativan or anything on me, if that's what you're asking," Misty replied sharply.

"Wait, would muscle relaxants work?" Tai asked, over the rustle the bag made on Van's exhales.

Jackie was timing them against Shauna's heartbeats, her pinky resting on Shauna's carotid — Van's chest much too quick, Shauna's heart much too slow. They were both moving closer to normal now — both of them coming back into their bodies

Van was going to be okay. Shauna was going to be okay.

"Much better than nothing," Misty said. "Where are they?"

"In my purse in our room, Nat. Ziploc baggie in the side pouch, white pills."

“You really shouldn’t keep loose pills in an unmarked container,” Misty chastised.

“I gave the bottle to Shauna. For her shoulder,” Tai explained. “But… I dumped most of them out and told her I only had a few left. It was after Jackie left, and I didn’t want her to… y’know.”

“Has she tried to, y’know? Jackie demanded, her tone urgent but soft, for Shauna’s sake.

“Not that I know of,” Tai offered, a little frantically, “but I wasn’t trying to give her the option.”

Jackie shuddered, squeezed Shauna tighter.

“Lottie,” Nat said, ignoring her. “Go get them. Take Van’s shit with you on the way and bring mine back. We’re trading rooms.”

“I —” Misty started.

“I don’t wanna hear it,” Nat insisted. “We can manage for one night.”

“I was just going to say I’d go with her.” Misty sounded wounded. “Buddy system.”

“Let’s go, Quigley,” Lottie sighed.

The door slammed shut behind them.

Didn’t want her to y’know…

Shauna alone, Shauna in pain, Shauna throwing back a bottle of her prescription meds -Tai had worried about that? Thought there was an actual, serious chance that Shauna would try to kill herself and no one had thought to mention it to Jackie? There wasn’t, though. She’d been fine. Shauna wasn’t like that. Dying wasn’t an option in her mind. Never was. But still…

Didn’t want her to… y’know.

She’d ask Tai about that later, get her alone somehow.

“Everything’s okay,” Jackie said to Shauna, brushing her hair behind her ear.

Tai was saying much of the same on the other side of the room, Van starting to grow audibly calmer.

Thank you. Thank you.

“I won’t let them bring that shit up anymore, okay?” Jackie tried. “I won’t. I’ll protect you, yeah?”

Jackie saw a tear run down Shauna’s cheek and jumped a bit.

“Oh. Oh, baby,” she whispered. Shauna didn’t move, but her eyes started to clear some — the veil lifting.

“Is she coming back?” Nat asked, peering around Jackie to get a look at her.

“I think so.” Jackie answered, focus still on Shauna.

Shauna shook her head, like she was clearing water out of her ears, at the exact same time Lottie and Misty burst back through the door.

“Thank God,” Jackie heard Tai say. She couldn’t tell whether it was about Shauna or Van or both.

Jackie was crying — silent tears, body in control. But she was crying. Shauna blinked a few times before looking at her — really, truly looking at her.

“Oh, hi, baby. Hi,” Jackie gushed, cupping Shauna’s cheeks and watching her adjust to her surroundings again — eyes flitting around the room.

“Hi,” she croaked. Jackie grinned through the tears, hugging her again. “Jax, is —” she cleared her throat, “is everything okay?” Jackie nodded against her, reveled in the feel of Shauna’s hands as they made their way to the small of her back.

“Here, baby, take these, okay?” Tai said, a bit too insistently.

“Let me crush them and put them in a sip of water. They’ll work faster that way, anyway,” Misty said — a beat of silence followed by a few thumps of something heavy against the table. Shauna jumped at the noise, jostling Jackie.

“Should you even be doing that?” Tai questioned. She sounded so broken, struggling for control. Jackie wanted to hug her, wrap her up and assure her that Van would be alright.

“Again, I’m a nurse. I know how to give medication.” Misty came across as bored, almost. Like this was something she said a lot. “Please, for the love of all that is good and holy, get out of my way now.”

Misty’s second mention of being a nurse, Jackie’s first time thinking of Rachel. A woman she’d loved a week ago, reduced to a bullet point on her to do list. Maybe not deep love, maybe not true love, but still — a love of some kind, reduced to apathy in an instant.

“Okay, Van, small sips. Good. There you go,” Misty announced, “Easy as that, when you just let me do my job.”

“Did I…?” Shauna finally spoke, directing the question at Nat.

“Yeah, man. You did. But we’re all good. Everything’s good.”

“Jackie, could you maybe get off of me for a minute?” Shauna rasped. Jackie complied quickly.

“Oh, god, of course. I’m sorry, I just —”

“No, it’s okay,” Shauna assured her, roughly wiping at her cheeks. They were red, suddenly, like she was embarrassed. “I’m just… a little overheated.”

Jackie tried to rub her tears away for her — she didn’t like how Shauna pawed at herself forcefully — but Shauna jerked out of her reach. Jackie furrowed her brow, staring at her, hand hanging limply in the air. Shauna took it in her own and Jackie relaxed a bit.

“I don’t know what I missed, but… Could we just go to bed? I’m so fucking tired, Jax.” Shauna was pleading, lashes heavy like she may fall asleep right there.

“I don’t think we really finished what we started,” Misty said, closing the ziploc bag.

Van was halfway to sleep, too, head lolling to the side even as she tried to hold it up, nearly limp in Tai's grasp. Jackie might've worried Misty had fucked with her somehow, if she didn't know how tired these attacks made Van, even without the aide of medication.

Tai snatched the pills out of Misty's hand. "We are going to bed. Van needs space. Shauna needs sleep. Everything else can wait."

Misty opened her mouth.

"Bed, now," Jackie agreed definitively, glaring at her until she shut it again.

"I'll help," Lottie said gently, slipping one of Van's arms around her shoulders and finding purchase on her waist. Tai and Lottie hoisted Van up.

"I'll go with you guys," Nat said. "C'mon." Nat held a hand out to each of them and Jackie and Shauna both accepted gratefully, rising to their feet.

"Misty, are you okay for just a minute?" Nat asked. "Or you can come with, if you want?"

"I'm okay, you won't be long," Misty nodded at Nat, busying herself with the cards again.

Jackie watched the others slip into Van and Tai's room, waiting for the door to shut before she said goodnight to Nat. Shauna had gone into their room ahead of her, mumbling something about changing.

"You did good in there, Taylor," Nat offered with a small smile. 'I know it sucks to watch. And hey,' she rested a hand on Jackie's shoulder, "she might be weird for a minute, yeah? But she'll come around. You can call me, if you guys need anything."

Jackie flung her arms around Nat, launching herself at her. Nat paused for a second before returning the hug.

"Thank you, Nat. For everything," Jackie said into her shoulder. "For being there for everyone."

"Uh, yeah. Anytime," Nat replied with a nervous chuckle. "It's, uh, what we do, right?"

"Yeah," Jackie murmured, squeezing her tighter. "But you especially."

14. the romeo to her juliet

2007

"You've reached Ralph. I'm not available to come to the phone right now… you know what to do after the beep, or at least I hope you do."

Jackie huffed, cradling the phone between her shoulder and her ear. She tore another dress off its hanger roughly, tossing it aimlessly behind her, hoping it landed in the stack that had been growing for the past hour.

The line beeped.

"Ralph. This is my third time calling. Call me back."

Jackie dropped the phone on her bed, amid piles of the things she wanted to keep. Clothes, mostly, because rebuilding a wardrobe was possible, but expensive and tiring. Her jewelry, she always brought that. Light and easy to carry. Her old tape player, the only tape she owned left inside it. And a small pile of books, stacked neatly.

She never used to bring this much, not when she first started out. She was twitchy, scared she'd be too slow if she was bogged down. Things were different now, though. People cared less, her face wasn't plastered on magazine covers as frequently. There'd been a brief resurgence last year, when the ten-year anniversary bullshit had come out, but since then everything Yellowjackets had quieted again.

She allowed herself more now. Designer clothes that she'd worked her ass off for. Three pairs of sunglasses, which she knew was excessive even for a normal person. Her little stack of books.

Newer additions to her collection that she couldn't bring herself to abandon in her Berlin apartment: The Night Watch by Sarah Waters, Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro. Truth and Beauty: A Friendship by Ann Patchett, a book she considered important to her actual career. The memoir, in her opinion, the one she had used as inspiration in her ghostwriting, though none of the people she wrote memoirs for had lives that interested her nearly as much.

Then there were the two that she'd always brought with her, ever since she snuck back into her childhood home to retrieve them. A thin, glossy collection of Emily Dickinson's poetry, a gift from Shauna for her fifteenth birthday. A copy of Emma, also technically a gift from Shauna, though not one she'd intended to be Jackie's from the jump. She sat on her bed, pulling it out of the stack and turning it over in her hands.

Jackie had watched Shauna read it the summer before their senior year. Between movies at Jackie's house, or by Lottie's pool while the other girls rubbed more baby oil into their already bronzed skin, scribbling in the margins as she went. The night she'd finally finished it, Jackie was sitting across from her, watching her chew on her lip and scrunch her nose as she wrote, pretending to be flipping through a magazine. Later that night, drunk on her mom's tequila, Jackie had clambered on top of Shauna and told her a secret, lips brushing her neck.

“I wish I could see all those thoughts you have. I wish I could read your mind sometimes.”

Shauna had given no response, just wound her needy fingers through Jackie’s hair and guided Jackie’s mouth back to her own.

After Shauna left the next morning, Jackie found the copy of Emma lying on her vanity. She flipped it open, curious, to see a note from Shauna written on the title page.

In case you still want to see all those thoughts I have. xo

Jackie was looking at the inscription, tracing her fingers over it, when the sharp ring of the phone startled her. She jumped, slamming the cover shut like she’d been caught at something.

“Hello?” she answered briskly.

“Hillary, my girl,” came Ralphs’ sing-song voice, “what can I do you for?”

He still called her Hillary. The first fake identity that she’d had him create for her. It was funny, the way he clung to that, like it was her real name to him somehow. Though Jackie supposed it was, since he never knew her real real name.

“I’m moving,” she explained, “leaving Germany.”

“As in… for good?”

Jackie mulled it over, how to answer that question. She liked her home there, but nowhere was permanent to her. And Van needed her. Whatever this new relationship was, this woman who she was so smitten with, it… didn’t sit right with Jackie. This wasn’t who Van was, gushing over some woman, dropping everything to move in with her the second she asked. Something was wrong and Jackie needed to be there. In person. Not just a visit, people can easily fake their way through a visit. No, Jackie needed to be there for good.

“Yeah. As in moving back to the states,” she sighed. “I need everything. Real passport, birth certificate, social, state license, the whole nine.”

Ralph paused for a moment.

“You haven’t had to drive in years, I have half a mind to make you retake the test.”

“Yeah, well use the other half,” Jackie joked.

She heard him laugh as he shuffled through papers, a sound she’d been waiting for. Him moving, getting this thing going.

“Alright, alright. What state? If it’s California again, I think we could reuse—”

“Connecticut.”

“Connecticut?”

“Yeah, it’s not for, like, fun, okay? It’s… I’ve just gotta get there.”

“I thought you don’t do the East…” Ralph trailed off. She knew he was worried about entering into the asking too many questions zone.

Jackie hadn’t lived anywhere near the northeast. Not since before the crash. Not with Shauna right there.

“I didn’t,” she mumbled. “Now I do, I guess.”

“It’s gonna take me a few months, kid,” he announced, apologetically. “This is a tall order. I’m assuming you want the good shit, if you’re moving back. Stuff you can use for work, bank accounts, whatever?”

Jackie didn’t have months. Something was wrong now and she needed to be there. The need was a pit in her stomach, an ache in her bones, making her sick.

“Yeah, I do, but… months? I need it now, Ralph,” she complained. “Seriously. Something’s… there’s something I have to deal with.”

He sighed and clicked his tongue.

“I can do you a passport and license now. Those are easy. Get ya in the country, if that’s where you need to be. I like you, you know I do, so I’ll rush it,” Ralph offered. “Birth certificate and social, though… those might take a while and I can’t guarantee you I get you the same name and birthdate. You might have to change the identity when those are done.”

“That’s the best you can do?” Jackie asked with a sigh.

“Best I can do,” he affirmed.

“I guess I’ll take it then. But rush needs to mean, like, big rush, yeah?”

“You got it.”

She gulped after he hung up.

Hold on tight, Van. I’m coming home.

PRESENT

“I’m sorry,” Shauna mumbled. They were sitting in bed, a foot of space between them. Jackie hated that foot of space, wanted to drop kick the dead air filling it.

Shauna had been silent for 15 minutes, arms wrapped around her stomach, Jackie staring at her intently, watching for any signs of… that again. That thing she did. Dissociation. Jackie knew the word. That’s what it was. But it was Shauna. It felt different, seeing it happen to Shauna.

“You don’t need to be sorry,” Jackie assured her.

Shauna wouldn’t make eye contact. She stared at her lap, cheeks still blazing. Jackie’s hands flinched, desperate to touch her face, but she was determined to respect the boundaries that had come with this episode.

She’d faltered a little earlier, an ache in her chest when Shauna rejected her touch. Shauna must’ve seen it, because she immediately took Jackie’s hand in her own. She hadn’t wanted to, though. Jackie could tell. It made her feel sick.

They didn’t have boundaries. Not before, not back then, both of them touching each other as they pleased. Except they did. They had limits, they just left them unspoken.

On the rare occasions when Shauna would jerk away from Jackie’s touch, Jackie always clung to her harder, pouting, whining, whatever it took for Shauna to acquiesce. Then there

were the times Jackie had felt like Shauna's gaze was physical, like she was studying her, like she'd take her apart and examine her under a microscope if Jackie gave her the chance.

Things were different now. Jackie was used to running. She knew she'd never let herself feel like she'd fallen into a trap, not even if Shauna was the one setting it. Her freedom to move through life as she pleased was non-negotiable. Jackie saw the panic in Shauna's eyes every time she left the room, but Shauna let her go.

It was huge, witnessing that. Her Shauna — possessive, jealous, controlling, even though she swore up and down that she wasn't — watched her walk away multiple times, the shock of her return still so fresh, and she let her.

Jackie was going to be better, too. She was going to wait for Shauna. She was going to sit on her fucking hands if she had to, because God she wanted to touch those fucking cheeks but she wanted Shauna more.

Shauna turned to her, finally. Beneath her exhaustion was embarrassment, the same face she'd made when Jackie would compliment her a little too directly. Would call her hot or a total babe. Stood behind her and made eye contact with her in the mirror and gripped her hips and told her how beautiful she was. Embarrassed.

It made Jackie burn with anger, rage rooting itself in her chest, weaving through her ribs, wrapping around them. Jackie could've been there. She could've prevented this fucked up world. The one where Shauna hurt so much and felt guilty for it. Embarrassed about it.

"Can I…" Shauna trailed off, blinking slow, like she'd lost the thought.

"What, baby?" Jackie asked softly. "Can you what?"

Shauna blinked a few more times, silent and frowning.

Shauna spoke again, voice scratchy, higher than usual.

"Can I just hold you?" she murmured. Her eyes were huge. Wide pools of brown pleading with Jackie. That innocent face, the look that said she could do no wrong.

"Come here," Jackie answered, arms outstretched.

"No, I mean—" Shauna's words were sticky, she sounded confused. It was to be expected, but that didn't relieve the ache in Jackie's heart.

Shauna huffed in frustration, covered her face with both hands and shook her head. Jackie waited. She hated every second of it, but she waited. Shauna calmed down after a few long moments. She readjusted, scooting closer to the headboard and reached for Jackie, gripping her waist and tugging.

Oh. Oh, Shauna.

Jackie complied, moving closer, leaning into Shauna's chest. Shauna's arms tightened around her and she felt her breath against the top of her head. Shauna hummed, a frustrated little sound. Jackie thought she knew what she wanted, hoped she knew what she wanted. She lifted herself into Shauna's lap, arms moving to circle her neck, sitting sideways so that she could cradle Shauna's head against her chest.

“Yeah,” Shauna whispered in approval.

She fell asleep quickly, body going slack against Jackie. It wasn’t the best position for either of them—Jackie forcing her spine ramrod straight, Shauna’s neck bent at an odd angle — but Jackie didn’t want to move her. Not yet. Shauna could have a few more minutes like this, Jackie could give her that much.

Van was sleeping too, hopefully. Curled up with Taissa in the room next door. Jackie wished she was angrier with her. She wished she was angrier with Shauna, too, after the day they’d had. She wasn’t comfortable with anger, not her own at least, and she fucking hated that about herself. How freeing would it be to say things that cut straight to the bone like Shauna? Hold a grudge like Misty? Punch a wall like Nat?

She’d sort of gone the Nat route, earlier, pinning Lottie to the ground and slamming her head back. It didn’t feel good. It felt like shit.

Jackie hadn’t planned on reacting like that. She’d tried to have a fucking conversation about it, demanding an explanation for Lottie’s batshit crazy, manipulative, callous behavior. Lottie told her to calm down. She tilted her head to the side, long hair swaying with the motion, and rolled her fucking eyes.

The rest was a blur, but Jackie knew she’d landed a few punches, scratched her hard enough to draw blood, and been pulled away by Nat and Shauna.

She remembered throwing the glass at Van, feeling Shauna’s fingers tight around her wrist. Everything Nat had told Jackie, all the things about an inconsolable Shauna, screaming until blood bubbled up from her throat, brokenhearted, starving of her own volition, Van confirmed. In one goddamn second, Van’s eyes told her everything she needed to know.

Jackie loved Van. More than almost anyone else. Her best friend, her ride or die. Lottie was… well, Jackie loved Lottie. She did. But it was different with her. More distance, more tension, more anger running beneath the surface. Van was her person. The only one that was always there.

And Jackie was so fucking pissed at her. Livid. Being angry with Van felt like hell. But Jackie couldn’t let herself be a doormat. She was right to be angry.

It was beginning to feel like all anyone did was lie to Jackie and she wanted to stay angry about that like a normal fucking person. She’d said it, out loud and in her head, all day. I’m pissed. I’m so furious with you. I’m going to be angry for a long time.

She’d tried to make it true, but it wasn’t. Jackie should be viscously angry with Van, who denied her the chance to help Shauna while they were out there and manipulated her into staying away from her for all those years after they returned. She should be indignant with Shauna for everything, all the lies she told then and the ones she’d told in the past few days just to cover her tracks. She was a little mad at Lottie but, considering their history, Jackie should probably be homicidal about it by now.

Instead, she sat in the arms of the woman she was in love with, counting her breaths, trying to commit every inch of her body to memory, while she worried about this woman she loved so much—her gentle, tortured soul of a best friend.

Who was Jackie to fuss about lies, anyway? She was the queen of falsehoods. People who thought they'd known her had no clue who she really was. That was her charm, it always had been. Reflecting what people wanted to see in her and making them think it was real.

Women she'd dated for years never even learned her fucking name. Everything about her was fake, her lies professional. But… Jackie had never lied to them. To Shauna, or Van, or any of the other women. Not about anything serious. She'd never intentionally tried to deceive them.

Shauna was slipping into a deeper sleep. Jackie needed to move her while she could still rouse her. She shifted just slightly, starting to push herself off of Shauna's lap, and Shauna's arms instantly tightened around her. Jackie pried herself free and held Shauna up, so that her weight didn't pitch her upper body forward. Once she'd mirrored Shauna's position, back to the headboard, legs out in front of her, Jackie shook her gently. Shauna didn't startle like Jackie expected, just groaned and shook her head, not conscious enough to be considered awake.

"Shauna, lay down," Jackie insisted. 'You can't stay like this.' Shauna muttered unintelligible protests under her breath, but she started to sink lower in the bed. "There you go, lay down next to me, c'mon."

Jackie guided Shauna into laying on her side. Before she could join her, Shauna draped an arm across her lap and passed out again, fingers digging into the space where Jackie's thigh met her hip. Jackie stayed where she was, watching Shauna sleep, worrying about her, worrying about Van next door, even Lottie down the hall.

She dozed occasionally, but never for long. Her eyes kept flicking to the room phone on the nightstand beside her, like her body was waiting for a call that her mind had forgotten about. Shauna was deep asleep, scarcely moving other than the deep rise and fall of her chest and the occasional scrunch of her nose.

The room phone rang once, a sharp trill breaking the silence. Jackie lunged sideways, answering before it could ring a second time. She glanced at Shauna before she spoke. Still sound asleep, mouth parted, snoring a little.

"Hello?" she whispered, watching to see if Shauna would stir from the sound of her voice. She didn't move.

"Jesus, you picked up fast," Tai said, voice low and soft.

"Couldn't sleep," Jackie offered. She let herself get comfortable again, carefully readjusting Shauna's arm on her lap. "Had a feeling someone might… I dunno. Just had a feeling."

"You don't have to whisper," Tai murmured. "Shauna will sleep through it. I swear she could sleep through anything after this happens."

Anything. Shauna disassociating like this out there, without Jackie to watch over her. Losing control of her body for God knows how long, then passing out and sleeping through what? Enough that Tai thinks she could sleep through anything.

“Van, too,” Jackie told Tai. “She’ll sleep, too.”

Shauna’s hair fell across her face. Jackie pushed it back gently, and she really meant to stop there. Meant just to uncover Shauna’s pretty face, keep it from sticking to her lips, and stop fussing with her. But her hand moved of its own accord, smoothing over it again. And again. And again.

Shauna gripped the fabric of Jackie’s pajamas in response, hand still resting near her hip, but showed no signs of waking.

“Look, I can’t believe I’m fucking asking you this,” Tai said, voice a little louder, like she was testing it out, “but I need you to tell me what that was.”

Fuck. You and me both.

“That shit set her off. It set most of us off,” Jackie watched Shauna’s lips part with a particularly deep breath. “She gets attacks. Panic attacks, really, but… we just call them attacks.”

“Does she get these attacks a lot?” Tai questioned. Jackie heard her shifting, fabric rubbing against the speaker of the phone briefly. “She’s—I mean, I know she gets upset like this. I’ve seen it before. I just thought… once we got back maybe it… has she been this way since the woods?”

“She’s had them on and off since we got back, yeah.” Jackie unfurled Shauna’s fingers, gone white with the tension of her grip, laying them flat against her thigh. Shauna grunted in her sleep, pressing her forehead forward against Jackie’s hip. “Sometimes they’re worse than others. It didn’t used to be as bad, actually. It wasn’t until…”

Siobhan. It wasn’t until Siobhan.

But how was Jackie supposed to tell Tai about That Woman? There was so much to it. It was complicated and there were parts she knew Van wouldn’t want Tai to know. Huge parts, things so integral to the narrative that Jackie didn’t know how to explain any of it without mentioning them. But she’d gone and opened her mouth, distracted by Shauna’s little movements and her need for Van to be okay.

“Until? Until what?” Tai demanded.

“It’s not— I-I’m just—” Jackie sighed. She’d done it now. It was too late to backpedal, there was no way for her to get out of this without sharing something. “Oh, fuck.”

“Jackie,” Tai pleaded, “I need you to tell me. I know there’s something.”

Tai’s voice broke. She was getting choked up, desperation in her words.

Jackie wanted to tell her everything. To start from the top and work her way forward, give her every detail and make her understand what Van had gone through. Tai needed to know, didn’t she? Van was hurting. She needed someone—someone who got it, or at least got her—and Jackie couldn’t be that person for her right now. Not with Shauna going catatonic in front of everyone and panicking whenever Jackie left the room, clinging to her like a lifeline. Jackie didn’t really want to leave Shauna either. They’d been apart for too long. They needed this.

But Van's trust was hard-earned. She didn't give it away freely, especially not after That Woman. Jackie was one of the few who had it, solidly and undoubtedly, and she needed to walk that line carefully. There was no winning, no way to make everyone happy, no best decision.

"Oh, honey," Jackie tried, "I… it's just not my story to tell. I really wish I could—"

Tai cut her off, again.

"Her wrists. What's that about? You can tell me that much. I could feel it, even before you said anything, I could tell. I need to…"

The breath Tai drew in sounded sharp, serrated and painful. It made Jackie's own throat sting.

"I need to know this shit if I'm going to help her. She won't tell me anything and I… I…"

Tai was right. Van wouldn't tell her, not without prompting.

"Listen, maybe I could talk to her," Jackie offered. "Maybe I can convince her to—"

"Bullshit. You know she won't. I need to understand."

Tai was begging, taking a tone Jackie had never heard from her before. There would be a point where Taissa was too distraught, too frazzled, to take care of Van, and Jackie worried that she was reaching it.

"Okay, okay. Shhh, it's okay," Jackie soothed.

Shauna gave a contented murmur and slid closer, resting her head on Jackie's lap and slipping her other arm behind her lower back. Jackie started to cry, overwhelmed by the tenderness of Shauna's unconscious movements and the pain she knew Tai was feeling right now. She sniffled, tried to mask it by coughing.

"I'll tell you what I can, yeah? What you need to know. But you have to… Just give me a minute to think. I need to do this right."

"Please, just tell me. I can't do this—"

"There was a woman," Jackie blurted.

Fuck it, I guess.

"A woman?" Tai repeated, measured and careful, like she'd received confirmation of a terrible suspicion.

"Yeah. She was… awful. Truly awful. Like, one of the worst people I've ever met."

Jackie wished she could still see Shauna's face, buried in her lap. She twisted a strand of her rich, brown hair around a finger, caught the scent of peppermint in the air as she released it.

"She didn't start out that way, obviously, or at least Van says she was sweet at first. And I believe it. The woman was a snake. I wasn't around for the beginning of it. I was in Berlin."

Jackie should've been there. She should've moved back the second Van told her she'd met That Woman. She called Jackie after NA one night, late in Berlin, later than she normally called, and told her about this woman she'd met in her meeting. She was buzzing, excited. Too excited, Jackie remembered thinking, far too excited about this woman she'd met once at narcotics anonymous.

"Anyway," Jackie continued, "they got really serious really fast. When Van told me they were moving in together, I just had… I had a horrible feeling about all of it. It made me nervous, them living together, so I started figuring out how to get back. It's a process, though. For me to pick up and move like that. Took a while. The woman—"

"What's her name?" Tai's sudden interruption startled Jackie.

She swallowed, preparing herself to spit the name out.

"Siobhan. Her name was Siobhan." It tasted like poison in her mouth—rotted berries, stale water, old meat. It tasted like everything awful, all at once. "She's dead now. Died in 2010."

"Dead? How'd she die?" Tai was quiet, like she didn't want those words to rouse Van, as if maybe the word dead would be too much.

"Overdose. Good riddance. There were times I thought I really wanted to… I could've…"

I could've snapped her in half. I could've slashed her throat. I could've done every single thing I couldn't do out there.

Jackie took a shaky breath and focused on the gentle movement of Shauna's chest against her thigh.

"Well, anyway. She's dead now. That's what matters. Three years, they spent together. I moved to fucking Connecticut, just to keep a closer eye on things. To be more available when Van needed me. That cunt hated me."

Jackie wasn't used to being hated in the way That Woman had hated her. Sure, some people found her annoying, thought she was being fake, brushed her off. But it never felt personal, the way it did with Siobhan. The only other person Jackie had ever felt actual, violent hate from was… Shauna, in their darkest moments. Her Shauna, the woman laying with her head in Jackie's lap, letting out soft, sleepy noises, hand resting under her shirt, fingers brushing hot against her stomach.

They weren't the same. Shauna's hate was an outlier, something that'd consumed her, eaten her alive. The anger in Shauna had melted her down, used her mind and her body as fuel. Siobhan's anger was her fuel, her violence made her stronger.

They weren't the same.

"And like I said, it isn't mine to tell you. I'm only saying this so that you… understand what she's been through. It was bad. That woman got in her head. I mean, really fucked with her."

Jackie choked on her words, cradled the back of Shauna's head in her hand. Shauna moaned in her sleep, a happy sound, and Jackie sobbed. "I did my best to get her out of it, but… it took me a while. I did my best, Tai."

“I believe you,” Tai murmured softly.

“She was one of those… God, I don’t even know what to call her. Predators. She knew how to keep her on the hook. They were on and off, a couple times Van moved in with me and I thought they’d be done, but… well, it took a few tries. I think that woman picked her. Like, not from the get-go. Not like a stalker or one of those weird fans, or she probably would’ve realized who I actually was. But, just… once she realized who Van was, what she’d been through, I think—”

“She knew she could get to her.”

“Exactly.”

“So she used to…” Tai stopped abruptly, swallowed, restarted, “to grab her by her… by her—”

“By her wrists, yeah. It’s… there was all sorts of horrible stuff and I can’t share more of her shit, I’m sorry, I can’t,” Jackie insisted, determined to hold firm, no matter how much Taissa cried or how broken she sounded. “And honestly, I’m not even sure I know all of it. But… but yeah, that’s a big one.”

Jackie waited for Tai to respond. She could hear her breathing faintly on the line. Jackie counted to five to give her time— one, she pressed her thumb against Shauna’s back gently, two, her pointer finger, three, middle finger, four, ring, five, her pinky.

“I know it’s a lot—”

“How did it end?” Tai finally spoke.

“That bitch tried to… she told Van she couldn’t see me anymore. She never wanted her to see me. She tried to keep me away the whole time, from the second I got back. That’s how I knew I was right.”

Shauna tossed a leg over Jackie’s, her thigh resting on both Jackie’s calves.

“Van would leave the room and she’d immediately jump on me. Whole demeanor changed. But I couldn’t be too blunt about it with Van. I was scared she’d convince her that I was the problem and I… didn’t want that woman to have her alone like that.”

Jackie slipped her hand under the collar of Shauna’s baggy sleep shirt, ran it up and down her spine. Shauna moaned again. God, she really was a heavy sleeper after these episodes. She usually jumped up with any interruption, noise or touch. It was nice to be able to watch her like this, to touch her and listen to her appreciative noises without waking her, but it scared Jackie a bit. Shauna still seemed gone to the world, in a way.

“But… the first time she said it, really told Van it was me or her. That’s when…” Jackie cleared her throat. “Van didn’t take it well. So I came and got her and she was… it was bad… Lottie and I took her away for a while, tried our best to take care of her… she got better, she really did. But she hasn’t been the same since.”

Tai was silent. Jackie counted on Shauna’s back again, brushing bare skin this time.

One… two… three… four… five.

“Taissa, are you okay?”

Silence. Jackie would’ve thought the call dropped if it weren’t for Tai’s faint breathing, irregular in pattern but constant.

“I… I know this is a lot. We can be done. With… with Van’s stuff, I mean.” Jackie shifted. Her legs were numb from sitting up like this, with Shauna’s weight on her. Shauna’s fingers flexed against her as she moved. “But… I need you to talk to me. About Shauna. I need your help, too.”

“What do you want to know?”

Tai’s tone had changed. She’d pulled herself together. This was her matter-of-fact voice, her down-to-business demeanor. Softer, just slightly, but manufactured. Jackie really wished she could just pull her into a hug.

“These… episodes. Has she… Nat told me they started right after I—I—”

Jackie was nervous, suddenly, like Tai was a schoolteacher who might reprimand her for her absence. How could Tai not blame Jackie for Shauna’s pain? How do you forgive someone for something like that?

“Sorry, just… Okay, I guess I’m asking what you know about these episodes. Like… how they started. Was this one the same as the ones back then? Just… you know, whatever you can tell me.”

“This one was mostly the same, yeah. They started a week after you… left. The first week she just sort of… it sounds like Nat told you already, what that week was like? The, uh, screaming and… and…” Tai’s varnish was wearing thin, emotion creeping back in.

“Yeah,” Jackie whimpered, sobs trying to surface in the back of her throat. “She told me.”

“Okay.” Jackie could see Tai nodding so clearly in her mind’s eye. The curt nod she gave when she wanted to move on, finished gossiping about the underclassmen, ready to leave the party, antsy to break huddle and go kick the other team’s ass. “So, it was after that. She went through these… phases. It was bad, Jackie.”

The words Jackie had offered Tai earlier, spit back at her. It was bad. Those words meant so much coming from them. Bad was worse for them. Worse than a plane crash, than a wolf attack, than taking a life. Jackie counted Shauna’s breaths.

“We had to… lock her in the side room. Nat barricaded the window from the outside after she broke the glass one night. Cuts everywhere. She was, uh… convinced she could get to you.” Jackie ran frantic fingers through Shauna’s hair, brushing it back, tangling up in it. “We didn’t know if she meant your… your body or—did she tell you that she…”

“Saw me?” Jackie croaked, chest shaking with effort.

“Yeah. Yeah, okay. Well, I think sometimes, especially in the beginning, her hallucinations of you were outside. But there was no telling what she’d do, so we… locked her in. I was scared she’d go catatonic out there. She couldn’t control it at all, back then. She was gone more often than not. There weren’t… triggers then. Just… just everything was the trigger.”

“And now?” Jackie questioned. “Now there are specific times?”

“We didn’t stay close. Not like you and Van. Lost touch in our twenties, until this shit stirred up. But as far as I know… yeah. She’s pretty good at controlling it now, I think. There was a bad year, right before she got married.”

Flashes of Shauna, young, empty-eyed, sitting on the floor, screaming, staring at nothing. Flashes of Jeff, too. Unzipping her wedding gown, kissing her, holding her like Jackie was now.

“She was gone almost that entire year. None of us knew why. Her parents… they were going to send her away. Somewhere nice, they wanted to use her settlement money. But… they thought she needed to be institutionalized.”

Shauna like Lottie. Dissected by men with a special interest in their trauma. Medicated, isolated.

Jackie wanted to hold Shauna to her chest. She was going to have to, after this call. She needed to move, needed Shauna’s heart beating against her own, needed to look into her eyes and see her there, looking back.

“He annoys the shit out of me, but Jeff he… he protected her. Wouldn’t let them send her there. Promised to take care of her. I’m pretty sure that’s why they married so young, so that he had final say on those things.”

Gratitude, shocking and overwhelming. He protected her. He protected her. He protected her.

“What are the triggers? Are they… do you know them?”

“You,” Tai answered, voice laced with an unspoken apology. Sorry for telling you what you already know. Sorry for putting it into words and forcing you to reckon with it.

“And the… the baby. But I can’t be the person to tell you about that. I can’t fucking do it, so don’t ask me about it.”

Tai sounded closer to panic than she’d been all night.

“I won’t. It’s okay, I won’t,” Jackie soothed. Shauna snuggled closer to her and she slipped her free hand back underneath her shirt. “Earlier you said you didn’t want her to… y’know. Has she…”

“No, no,” Tai promised quickly. “I mean… not that I’m aware of. I don’t think it’s her style, I just… I wouldn’t give anyone here sudden access to enough pills to off themselves, would you?”

Jackie exhaled slowly, relief flooding through her. Tai had given her the confirmation she needed to hear. Shauna wasn’t the kill yourself type. She was a lot of things, but that wasn’t one of them. An inconsolable Shauna, she could handle. Distant, angry, terrified, fucked in the head in all sorts of ways. Even homicidal. All manageable. Anything but a suicidal Shauna.

“No. I wouldn’t.”

“Jackie…” Tai mumbled, reluctant, hesitating about something.

Jackie scratched Shauna's back the way she'd always liked, nails brushing tiny circles against bare skin, and drank down her reaction, breathy little moans, leg slipping further over Jackie's. Responding now, even in her sleep, the same exact way she had then. Jackie wondered if Jeff scratched her back like this. If she had taught him how she liked it. She shook her head, trying to shake the image away.

"Yeah?" she prompted Tai.

"I… Thank you. For this. For telling me this and for… for being there for her."

"Oh. Oh, you're welcome, honey," Jackie tried to keep her tone even, Tai would spook easily if she got too sentimental. "Of course. I'll always be there."

Tai hummed her acknowledgment. She shifted again, something brushing the speaker, static in Jackie's ear.

"Tai… I know I said we're all in this together. And, we are. I totally believe that. Van and I aren't letting you and Shauna run from this, we've decided," Tai laughed, quiet and half-scoff, but Jackie cracked a smile anyway. "But… I think maybe the four of us should get together. I just think… I don't know… maybe we could meet up in the morning? Talk?"

"Yes," Tai agreed quickly.

"Yeah? Oh, good, okay. Shauna's so exhausted. She really hasn't slept at all the past few days. I don't wanna make her get up, so maybe in the morning you two could—"

"Are you kidding?"

"What? No, why—"

"You want me to get Van up so that Shauna doesn't have to walk next door?"

"She's so tired, Tai! It's been days of—"

"And Van isn't tired? This is Van awake and peppy to you? Are you delusional, Taylor? Did you see her tonight? Seriously, walk me through your state of mind right now because I can't imagine what possessed you to say that Shauna is more—"

"Okay, fine, fine," Jackie conceded. "We'll come to you. Jesus. I'll make my traumatized, actively-in-shock g—"

Jackie was going to call Shauna her girlfriend. It started to roll off her tongue, but she caught it, swallowed it back down. She felt too hot, suddenly. Shauna was like a furnace, pressed against her.

Taissa laughed, for real this time.

"You two never talk about shit, do you? I think Shauna would be more than okay with you calling her your girlfriend, Jackie. I feel like girlfriend—"

Jackie shifted, trying to get comfortable without dislodging Shauna. She'd sunk down too far, back unsupported and sore. She turned to grab the headboard with her free hand, to get some leverage.

"—isn't even enough—"

Smack. Jackie's elbow hit the wood hard. Pain shot through her arm.

"Shit," she yelped, eyes stinging with tears.

Apparently, Shauna wasn't immune to everything in this post-episode recovery phase. She sprang up, wide-eyed and staring at Jackie in panic.

"Jackie?" Tai demanded. "What's wrong?"

Jackie couldn't answer right away, because Shauna was rounding on her, too. She took Jackie's face between her hands, knocking the phone askew, and looked over every inch of it. Her gaze was intense, distraught.

At least I know she's with me again.

"Jax, what's wrong? Tell me what happened," Shauna demanded, hands sliding down to her chest, resting on top of her collar bones as she surveyed the rest of Jackie's body for damage.

"Jackie? Answer me," Tai insisted loudly. "Is that Shauna? Is she awake? What's going—"

At the same time, a bewildered Shauna spoke.

"Why are you on the phone? What's going—"

"Guys!" Jackie snapped. "I'm fine, holy shit. I hit my fucking funny bone, I'm sorry."

They both huffed out a sigh of relief.

"Shauna, I'm on the phone with Tai. We couldn't sleep. Tai, yes, Shauna woke up."

"We have a second bed," Tai said. "Do you want to just… you don't have to, but maybe you just come now, and then you don't have to make her get up again in a few hours?"

Shauna seemed pretty damn awake. She was touching Jackie, like everywhere. All at once. Fingers winding through her hair, gripping her waist, rubbing her thigh, hands in constant motion and it honestly felt like she'd grown an extra set.

She was trying to soothe herself, Jackie thought. Woke in a panic and was trying to ground herself.

"I think that's a good idea. We'll be over in a minute, okay?"

"That was more than a minute," Tai complained, swinging the door open for them. She was in nice pajamas, deep purple, a matching set. The room behind her was lamp-lit, a warm glow filling the space.

Jackie stood on tiptoe, wrapping her arms around Tai's neck and pulling her close. Tai met the hug without protest, squeezing her back. Jackie felt Shauna push past her into the room. She planted a quick, but firm kiss on Tai's cheek before breaking the hug.

"Oh, lord," Tai mumbled, pushing Jackie away. "Ease up Taylor, your girlfriend's watching," she added, awkwardly straightening her pajamas and ushering Jackie into the room.

Shauna was already pulling the covers back on the empty bed. She paused to raise an eyebrow at them. Her shut the fuck up look, given at many a sleepover, or long bus ride home. Tired Shauna was not to be fucked with.

It'd been a bit of a process to calm her down. Jackie tried talking her through it, but she still seemed too out of it to comprehend half of Jackie's words. In the end, Jackie went the kiss it better route. Maybe not the healthiest way to process, but it worked, soothing Shauna's nerves until she was yawning into Jackie's mouth.

Jackie rolled her eyes at Tai and tried to ignore the word ringing in her ears.

Girlfriend. If you told Jackie she was the love of Shauna's life, she'd believe you. The one that got away, the Romeo to her Juliet, her everything, her baby, her person. Sure, fine. But girlfriend? That felt so strange, so unbelievable to her.

The sight of Van curled up under a pile of blankets tore Jackie away from her thoughts. She rushed over, sitting on the edge of the bed next to her. Tai was hovering over Shauna, leaning down to hug her.

Van looked pale, skin glowing in the low light. Jackie brushed her hair back. She wanted to feel angry, but guilt was all that came up. Guilt for throwing that stupid, fucking glass at her. For making her duck and cower, afraid. Afraid of Jackie.

She pressed the back of her hand to Van's forehead. Cold, just as she'd expected. Shauna ran hot when she was upset, feverish, skin burning under Jackie's fingers. Van shivered, constantly seeking more heat. Jackie grabbed the quilt from the opposite bed and added it to the layers.

I love you, she'd said to Van after her, again and again, like it was a prayer or a lullaby. She repeated it now, in her head. Always.

Jackie kissed her temple, tears sliding down her cheeks. She wiped them away as she pulled back to take her in again.

She looked so young like this. Baby-faced, just like Shauna. She wasn't quite as soft in the cheeks—the surgeries in and out of the wilderness had failed to significantly alter the scarring—but her sweetness was still more than visible, no matter how hard she tried to secret it away.

Jackie would apologize in the morning. She'd make it better, make it go away. The pain of betrayal was something Jackie could take, compressing it between her hands until it was small, boxing it up and swallowing it down. But the guilt… Jackie couldn't live with that.

"Take these," Tai ordered. Jackie kept stroking Van's hair, watching as Tai shoved pills and water into Shauna's hands. "Advil and a muscle relaxant. How's your shoulder? Did you drink any water after the episode?"

"My shoulder is fine. I'm just fucking tired," Shauna groaned. Tai was rubbing wide circles on her back, watching her keenly. "Taissa, I can't fucking swallow these with you rubbing my back like that. I'm fine."

"Okay, first of all grumpy, shush," Tai whispered, stepping back to give Shauna space. "Van is sleeping."

“I was sleeping,” Shauna snapped, quieter. “Then you and Jackie decided to have girl talk in the middle of the night and you woke me up and then I got dragged over here because you two wanted to have a sleepover.”

Jackie smiled, eyes flitting between Van, snuggled up and sleeping peacefully, and Shauna and Tai, being as affectionate as they possibly could with each other. This was better, them together like this. Jackie felt safer like this.

“All everyone’s been saying is Shauna needs to rest this, Shauna needs to sleep that, and yet no one is actually letting Shauna sleep,” she grumbled.

She threw the pills back, chugging the entire glass of water in one go.

“Happy?” she asked, raising a brow at Tai.

“Extremely,” Tai replied sarcastically. “You can sleep now.”

“So kind of you,” Shauna quipped, smiling at her weakly. “Jackie?”

Her voice changed on a dime, small and pleading. She watched Jackie with wide eyes, patting the bed next to her.

“Yes,” Jackie answered, jumping up. “I’m here.”

When Taissa moved and Jackie laid down, Shauna maneuvered her how she wanted her, not bothering with words. Jackie let out a surprised gasp as Shauna flipped her on her side, because God, she was strong when she wanted to be. Shauna settled in behind her, arm around her waist, chest flush to her back, sharing her pillow.

“Goodnight, guys,” Tai yawned, her back to them so that she could curl around Van.

“Goodnight,” they both mumbled, sleep coming on fast.

“I love you,” Shauna whispered into Jackie’s hair. Jackie rested her arm on top of Shauna’s, interlacing their fingers.

“I love you too, baby.”

Five thudding knocks on the door.

Jackie shot up, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. Shauna groaned next to her and pulled the pillow over her head. It was light out now. Tai was on her feet already, stumbling towards the door. Van sat up in the bed, stretching her back, startling when she noticed Jackie and Shauna.

“What are you two—” she started.

Tai pulled the door open. It was Nat, dressed for the day already. Leather jacket, band tee, black jeans. Carrying a box of donuts with a Dunkin’ box of coffee perched precariously on top. Tai took the coffee from her, stepping aside to let her in.

“Well, good morning, sunshines,” Nat drawled. “What, I’m not cool enough for the slumber party?”

“It was an impromptu thing,” Tai started pouring cups of coffee.

Jackie wanted to hug Nat again, but she knew that was too much. She’d thought of her when she woke in the night, listening to Shauna and Van take deep, even breaths, and wondering if Nat was doing the same down the hall. Natalie had tried to kill herself a week ago, taken a rifle to her chin and nearly pulled the trigger. She’d be dead if no one had intervened and that was… well, that was a feeling Jackie understood.

She’d find a way to check in with her later. Jackie promised herself that much.

“Did we get much sleep?” Nat asked, glancing between Shauna and Van.

“I slept pretty good,” Van offered. “Must’ve, because I had no idea we had company.”

Van’d come out the other side, her voice lighter and body more relaxed. The pink was back in her cheeks, spreading across the bridge of her nose. She shrugged the heavy blankets off and reached for the coffee that Tai had poured for her.

Jackie sat up, folding her legs underneath herself and cracking her neck. Her head was pounding. She glanced at the clock. 7:45.

“What about you, Shauna?” Nat sat at the foot of their bed, flipping open the box of donuts on her lap.

“I would have,” Shauna’s voice was muffled by the pillow she was still clutching to her face. “If people stopped waking me the fuck up.”

Jackie smiled at her, prying the pillow away and tossing it aside. Shauna huffed, opening one eye to glare at her, nose and cheeks scrunched.

Jackie swopped down to kiss her cheek and Nat clicked her tongue in mock disapproval. Shauna blushed, but she grabbed the back of Jackie’s head and pulled her in for a proper kiss. Jackie giggled against her lips for a second before pulling away and winking at Nat.

“Tell me this isn’t what I have to look at from now on,” Nat begged. Jackie laughed, pulling on Shauna until she sat up next to her. “These fucking idiots being touchy-feely? I’m surprised you even let them in, Tai.”

Tai handed each of them a coffee, chuckling.

“Trust me, things were a little more… subdued last night.”

“God, I’m starving,” Shauna groaned. She reached for the box of donuts and Nat handed it over. “I need real food. All we’ve had is sugar.”

“You know what they say about beggars, right?” Nat joked. “You’re sounding a little choosy to me.”

Shauna grabbed two, chocolate for herself and maple for Jackie, and thrust the box back at Nat with an eye roll. Jackie struggled not to get emotional over Shauna choosing the right flavor for her. Dumb. The dumbest things were getting to her.

Not Shauna’s grand confessions of love or willingness to give up her entire life. It was the little things that kept lingering with Jackie. Shauna handing her a maple bar, pushing the passenger door open for her from inside the car, scraping her teeth against just the right spot

on her neck, wrapping her arms around her stomach and resting her chin on her shoulder. Shauna knew what Jackie wanted to eat, how she wanted to be treated. How to fuck her. How to hold her. She still knew Jackie more intimately than anyone who came after her ever had and that was startling, knocking her off balance every fucking time Shauna illustrated it.

Regret. It's regret. It's mourning twenty-five years of what could have been.

Jackie kissed Shauna's cheek again as she chewed. She crinkled her nose sweetly and kept eating.

Tai was standing near them, eyeing Van carefully.

"Strawberry?" she asked, gesturing towards the box.

Van shook her head.

"I'm alright," she said, sinking further back into the pillows.

Tai bit her lip, glancing at Jackie before tearing a chocolate glazed into quarters.

"Wait a minute, you went and got breakfast," Shauna held her coffee up in Nat's direction.

"Yes, Shauna, very good," Nat said cloyingly. She raised a brow at Jackie. "We sure it isn't still lights out in there?" Nat tapped her skull and Jackie nudged her knee with a foot, glaring.

"I meant, what the hell happened to not going anywhere alone?" Shauna shot back.

"You starting to get attached, Shipman? Worried about my well-being?"

Hearing Shauna's maiden name startled Jackie every fucking time. She flinched and Shauna must've noticed, because she silently slipped her hand under Jackie's shirt, rubbing small circles on her back, without interrupting her conversation with Nat.

"Unfortunately, yeah. I am. I'm attached to you not getting attacked by the fucking freaky cult, you caught me."

"Please," Nat argued, "I go where I want. Those motherfuckers can try me if they want."

"They did try you," Tai interjected. "They got you. Then I picked your ass up in an abandoned warehouse."

With Tai next to her and Nat chewing on the other side of Shauna, Jackie felt like the three feet separating Van from the rest of them might've just as well been an ocean.

She leaned into Shauna one more time.

"Love you," she whispered, lips brushing her ear.

Shauna smiled a true, toothy smile, one of the first she'd given that week. Jackie grinned back at her, before standing up and scooting over to the other bed.

"Yeah, well I'm here now aren't I?" Nat picked up another donut, powdered sugar falling onto the comforter. Shauna brushed it away. "They dropped me off for a reason. I can handle my shit."

Jackie threw an arm around Van and pulled her close. She was still for a moment—hesitant, Jackie could tell, the tension from yesterday lingering in her shoulders—but

eventually she relaxed her head against Jackie's chest.

"I'm pretty sure that reason was just that they wanted us all together, but sure, Nat," Tai laughed. "Nobody fucks with you."

Jackie put her nose to Van's hair and inhaled. Lavender, the same as always, even before the crash. One of the few things from before that Van had allowed herself to return to.

"Can I get you something else?" Jackie murmured. "We can call for—"

"No," Van said, staring into her coffee cup.

That tracks.

Jackie rubbed her back.

"You've gotta eat, angel," she said, keeping her voice low.

"I know," Van mumbled, her reply practiced.

How many times they'd had this exact exchange, Jackie couldn't say. They were both bad with food, constantly taking turns being the practical one, the one who insisted the other eat.

Natalie and Shauna were munching and murmuring in the background. Jackie could feel Tai's eyes on her back, watching her with Van.

She pressed a kiss to Van's temple.

"I'm sorry," Jackie whispered, stroking her hair. "For—for throwing that glass at you—"

"You were right to," Van muttered back. Her tone was strained.

"No," Jackie laid her cheek on the top of Van's head. "No, honey. I—yes, I was mad. I was—"

She didn't know how to say it—that yes, she had been fucking pissed, and she knew she was right to be, because they fucking lied to her, Van and Lottie, they did it for years and they let Shauna wither away with a pain that never had to be—but Jackie was afraid that if she did, Van would curl in on herself even more, hide in a corner and think she deserved to be treated with such violence. That she wasn't worthy of Jackie's love, of anyone's.

And Jackie couldn't do it again. The last time had nearly killed her. So Jackie would swallow the hurt down. It was better for everyone that way.

"I scared you," she insisted. "So I'm sorry."

Van said nothing, her eyes still downcast. Jackie knew her stomach would be churning with anxiety and shame. She knew, too, that Van wasn't going to talk about it. If she did, she'd start to cry, and then everyone would be all over her again. Maybe Van needed that—Jackie knew in her heart that she did—but Van was nothing if not flighty. She didn't want that. She didn't think she should have it.

Instead of pushing her, Jackie kissed her forehead again. Van sighed and tucked her cheek into her shoulder.

Jackie turned her head back to the opposite bed. Tai was pretending not to watch them, yawning.

It was catching. Jackie loudly joined her.

“What about your… whatever the hell they are to you? What are they up to?” Tai asked Nat.

“Jesus. Lottie will sleep late and Misty is doing her fucking… I dunno, Misty detective shit.”

She glanced between the two of them, her mouth in a grimace. “Did either of you get any sleep last night?”

“It’s fine—” Tai said.

“Plenty—” Jackie lied.

“Yeah right. How about I babysit your women for a little while so you two can get some more shut-eye?” Nat offered. “I’ll take ’em anywhere they want. Wanna go play some minigolf, sweetie?” she teased, patting Shauna’s head.

“We’re fucking fine,” Shauna argued, jerking away from her. “You guys are the ones who overreacted.”

She tried to play her response off as casual, but her lips kept pulling down into a nervous frown.

“If anyone here needs babysitting it’s you, Natalie,” Van teased, sitting up. Jackie moved back to the other bed, hopping in next to Shauna playfully like she might’ve when they were kids, trying to distract her. She landed half in her lap and Shauna smiled at her again. She shook her head, but slipped an arm around Jackie’s waist.

“I second that. But,” Shauna turned her attention to Jackie, “if you two want to sleep, I wouldn’t say no to some actual food.”

“Could be like old times,” Van shrugged. “The three of us used to—”

“Get crossed in random parking lots and call me from a payphone to pick your asses up?” Tai suggested, taking the space next to Van that Jackie had vacated.

“Oh, how about act like frat bros and get violently competitive over beer pong?” Jackie supplied, smirking up at Shauna.

They dissolved into laughter—Jackie couldn’t get over how good it felt to laugh with them — and when Shauna and Van made eye contact, their smiles didn’t falter. Jackie’s heart soared.

Van promising Jackie and Tai that she wouldn’t let them sleep too late was the clincher, convincing them to accept the opportunity to rest. Tai nearly double-downed on her objection, but Van cut her off with a kiss and a murmur in her ear. While they were occupied, Shauna pulled Jackie into a hug and whispered in her ear.

“Tai’s been sleepwalking, so just… she may not sleep and if you hear her moving around, check on her, yeah?”

Jackie nodded into her shoulder.

She'd been wondering about that since Tai had mentioned the… dog situation. She thought about telling Tai she'd stay up and keep watch as she sunk into the bed and pulled the comforter up to her chin. She drifted off before she could find the right words.

"Jackie. Jackie, wake up."

She opened her eyes, groaning. Shauna was standing above her, hands on her shoulders, expression tense. Their bags were piled at the foot of the bed.

What the fuck?

"Huh," Jackie mumbled, sitting up. "What's—"

Everyone was in the room, Van zipping up a suitcase on the floor, Tai looking like she'd also just been woken, rubbing her cheeks and blinking slowly. Nat was standing in front of the door with her arms crossed, tapping her foot. On either side of her were Lottie, rubbing her temples and looking absolutely wrecked, and Misty, shaking her head and clicking her tongue intermittently.

"We gotta go, Jax," Shauna demanded, pulling on her arm until she stood shakily, frowning at her in confusion. 'I have all our stuff,' Shauna shoved a pair of jeans and a sweater into her hands. "Just get dressed, okay?"

Jackie could hear Van saying the same to Tai, Misty mumbling under her breath, Nat and Lottie arguing quietly. She tried to separate it, to figure out what the hell was going on, but all the noise was blending together, a low hum of panic.

"Not until you tell me what the fuck is—"

"Lottie decided to kill an employee," Misty answered before Jackie could finish her question. Her hands were on her hips and she looked and sounded more annoyed than anything else. "So now we're fleeing the very sloppy crime scene."

"Misty!" Shauna and Nat snapped at the same time.

"What?" she challenged. "This really feels like a shoot the messenger situation."

She glared at Lottie.

"We weren't going to say anything to them until—" Shauna started.

"Lottie!" Jackie snapped. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Lottie sighed, letting her arms fall to her sides. Her forearm was still wrapped up tight in its bandage and Jackie felt a pang of guilt, even now, even with this.

"He was talking about us. He knew who we were. He said your name, even," Lottie swallowed hard, wringing her hands in front of her. She shifted her weight side to side. "So I… I panicked and I sort of…"

She trailed off, chewing on her lip.

“She sort of,” Misty whispered angrily, “followed him into the stairwell and shoved him over the railing and he sort of broke his neck. She killed him without even consulting me! I would’ve questioned him, but no, Lottie had to go and—”

“He knew who we were?” Tai finally ripped the covers off, staring from Misty to Nat to Van. “He knew who Jackie was?”

Jackie started changing, trying to ignore the nervous energy radiating off of Shauna as she watched her. Lottie killed someone. In the middle of the day. With all of them there. They’d been nothing if not memorable— screaming, crying, breaking things, receiving bizarre deliveries.

Someone had recognized her. Misty said he was talking about them, as in telling someone else who they were. Saying the name out loud, letting it spread like wildfire.

Jackie Taylor, alive. The surviving Yellowjackets together, on the move, staying in hotels, paying in cash.

They were fucked.

15. rosemary planted

"I'll drive," Shauna snapped, thrusting her hand out for the keys.

Misty handed them over, giving Nat a shrug when she scowled at her. They kept walking through the gravel lot, headed towards their new-to-them minivan. They'd exchanged Jackie's Mercedes, registered under Lucy Price, along with the beater Nat had purchased off of craigslist a few weeks ago, and came out with a hefty stack of cash on top of it.

They needed to stop traveling like a caravan, in four separate cars that were clearly linked to them by the cult freaks. They still weren't doing things as carefully as Jackie would've if she were on her own, but it was nearly impossible to meet those standards with the seven of them. At least they were trying now.

"Oh, the woman who went catatonic last night wants to drive?" Nat asked. "Are we sure that's the best fucking plan?"

"Natalie," Jackie warned, steering her away from Shauna with a gentle hand on her elbow.

Nat shook Jackie off and pulled her jacket tight around her chest, kicking a crushed beer can with her scuffed boot. Her anger wasn't unprompted. Shauna had been a bit of a… menace all morning, making biting remarks as they planned their next steps, rolling her eyes sarcastically, scoffing loudly.

"Shauna, how are you feeling? I meant to follow up," Misty tried, "but between you and Van and, God, Lottie going rogue, I just didn't—"

"Fine, Misty. I'm fine."

It wasn't really them she was mad at. Okay, maybe she was a little mad at Lottie. But her mood had changed when Jackie said no to her. Shauna had asked her, one more time, if they could break off from the group and leave this mess behind. Begged her, really. And Jackie didn't give in.

Though it'd been a while since it played out, this routine was familiar— Shauna pissed at Jackie, taking it out on everyone else, thinking she was slick, thinking Jackie didn't know exactly what was going on.

Shauna reached the van and yanked the driver's side door open. Jackie intercepted her, squeezing herself between Shauna and the seat. Shauna took half a step back, brows furrowed.

"What now?" she groaned.

The keys jangled as she dropped her arms to her sides in frustration. Jackie heard the door to the backseat slide open on the other side of the car.

"After you," Nat sighed.

“Oh, thanks!” Misty’s voice grew louder as she climbed in. “Should we take the middle back or the way back?”

Jackie pressed both hands to Shauna’s chest, tips of her fingers aligned with her collarbones. Shauna started bouncing her heel.

“I don’t fucking care, Misty,” Natalie grumbled from behind them.

“O-kay,” Jackie said, trying to keep a light tone, “I need you to not do this.”

“Not do wha—”

“Not do the angry, broody, biting everyone’s head off thing.”

Shauna huffed, shaking her head. Jackie pouted and Shauna’s features softened.

“I’m just trying to get us out of here,” she whined.

Like, truly whined. She forced the words out, her eyes wide, her lips pursed, her chest heaving with effort. She hadn’t changed. In so many ways, she was exactly the same as the girl she’d been.

Shauna in grade school, stomping her foot when Jackie upset her, cheeks flushing, making up excuses to be angry. Teenage Shauna, drunk, pulling on Jackie’s sleeve, begging to bail on the shitty party, getting so close to kissing her in front of everyone that Jackie’s heart nearly stopped. Shauna in her forties, exhausted, shock after shock with no real downtime, feeling responsible for something she wanted nothing to do with because Jackie made her stay.

Shauna never knew how to ask for Jackie. She never learned that all she needed to do was open her goddamn mouth and say that she needed her. Instead, she did this.

She’d picked a fight with Tai at that last kegger, the one before everything went to shit, because Jackie was dancing with Jeff. She was treating Nat like shit right now, because Jackie wouldn’t run away with her.

Nat and Misty were chattering in the background —it sounded like they’d chosen the very back row— and Jackie tuned them out, sliding her arms up and around Shauna’s neck and drawing her in.

Lecturing her wouldn’t do any good. She was damn near certain that Shauna just wanted her and honestly, why would Jackie deny her that right now? Why would she deny her that ever again?

“I know,” Jackie murmured, leaning forward until she could rest her forehead against Shauna’s. ‘Can you just… just try and not take it out on them?’ Jackie played with Shauna’s hair, twisting it between her fingers. “A few more hours, okay?”

Shauna dropped the keys onto the seat behind Jackie with a sigh. She braced herself against the car with one hand and slipped the other hand into the back pocket of Jackie’s jeans, which yeah, was a thing she used to do sort of a lot, but it’d been a long time and, Jesus fuck, Jackie was losing her train of thought and, based on the smirk on Shauna’s face, that was maybe the intention.

“And then we’ll have our own room and we can… uh, take a break from this shit,” Jackie continued, breath hitching when Shauna shifted, her nose nudging Jackie’s temple, her breath hot against her cheek.

“I’m so fucking sick of them right now,” Shauna mumbled low in Jackie’s ear. “I just… want you to myself.”

Oh.

Okay.

So they were doing this right now. It wasn’t in Jackie’s head. Flirty Shauna and angry Shauna had always been crossed wires, nearly impossible for Jackie to untangle at times.

Yesterday had been a nightmare. They’d fought so hard Jackie had actually considered whether this whole thing was going to blow up, Shauna had completely lost her fucking mind, Jackie had been sick with worry, unable to sleep.

It was barely even noon and Lottie had already murdered someone today. They were fleeing both a cult and a crime scene. Jackie was potentially going to be outed, the life she’d built on the verge of destruction. Nat and Misty were bickering a few feet from them, they needed to go pick up Tai and Van and Lottie down the road, and they were doing this.

Shauna was pinning her against the shitty minivan and feeling her up and brushing her lips against her ear and—

“For fuck’s sake!” Nat yelled. “If you wanna drive you’re gonna need to be able to keep your hands off of Jackie’s ass for two fucking seconds. Think you can manage that?”

Shauna pulled her face away from Jackie’s but didn’t move, keeping Jackie trapped between her body and the car.

“Natalie, I swear to—”

Jackie slapped a hand over her mouth and glared at her. She felt Shauna’s lips turn down into a frown under her palm.

“Sorry, Nat,” Jackie called out, “you’re right.”

She pushed against Shauna’s shoulders until she backed away. Before running around to the passenger seat, Jackie coaxed Shauna into a quick hug so that she could speak without Nat and Misty overhearing.

“Play nice with the others today and I promise you won’t regret it.”

Van’s car was parked in a long-term lot a few miles away. They’d ditched Tai’s at a different lot on their way out of the hotel. When they rolled up, Lottie climbed to the back, squeezing into the seat between Nat and Misty, and Van and Tai took the middle row.

“God, I need some coffee,” Jackie complained. “I’m gonna get such a headache.”

“Why didn’t you drink the coffee Nat brought us?” Shauna asked, reversing out of the lot.

“It was hot coffee,” Jackie shrugged. “I like iced.”

Shauna tilted her head just slightly, one brow lifted a few centimeters. The face she’d been making whenever she learned something new about Jackie. Not for the big things, like her girlfriend and her job, but for all the little details, the things like this.

“I did get you a cold brew on the way back from breakfast, Jack,” Van said, as she buckled her seatbelt, “but I forgot to bring it inside with us on account of… things and then—”

“Oh yeah, when we got in the car I chugged that shit,” Tai cut in. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Jackie laughed. “I would’ve done the same.”

“It is a road trip!” Misty chirped, leaning forward so that her chin rested on the back of Tai’s seat. Tai flinched and leaned away. “Plenty of time for stops to make things more pleasant for everyone!”

“It’s hardly a road trip,” Shauna said sharply. “Just because we’re all in one car doesn’t mean it’s a road trip.”

Jackie rested her hand on Shauna’s shoulder, rubbing little circles near the crook of her neck with her thumb. She felt some of the tension ease away.

“We’re on the road, aren’t we?” Nat argued. “Let the woman call it a road trip if it makes her happy. Why do you always have to correct people about the dumbest shit?”

Shauna raised her shoulders. Jackie slipped her hand behind her neck and started massaging, digging into the muscles on either side of her spine. Shauna glanced at her for a moment. Her cheeks were pink— she’d been stuck in a blush since Nat told them to break it up in the used car lot. Jackie offered her a smile and her scowl slipped away.

“I’m sorry, Natalie, for earlier. I’m just stressed. I’ll try and be…” Shauna trailed off.

“Less of a bitch?” Nat supplied.

“Yeah,” Shauna sighed. “Less of a bitch.”

“She’s not the only bitch among us,” Tai said, letting her head fall back against her seat.

Jackie surveyed them. Everyone was visibly exhausted, except Misty— no surprise there. Shauna and Nat were pissy, Tai and Lottie both looked dead on their feet, and Van was still recovering from the night before.

“Baby?” Jackie asked quietly, brushing Shauna’s hair behind her ear.

“Hmm?” Shauna caught Jackie’s hand in her own and brought it down to the console between them.

“Can we stop for coffee? We could do a drive-through?”

“Are you kid—” Shauna started.

“Yes!” Tai exclaimed, sitting up straighter. “Coffee. Come on, Shauna.”

“Please,” Lottie groaned from the back, arms crossed, head on Nat’s shoulder and eyes shut.

“This is so fucked up, you know that right?” Shauna huffed. “Murder a man, ditch our cars, and go on a nice little coffee run?”

“I’m failing to see how stopping for some caffeine makes that man any less dead,” Tai argued.

Van smirked at her, resting a hand on her knee.

“Such a good point.” Jackie grinned at Shauna. “Please, baby?”

“Fine, fuck. But we’re going at least twenty miles before stopping.”

“Okay, that’s good anyway. I think we all need to have a talk,” Jackie announced, turning to face everyone in the back.

It’d been swirling around in her mind, what to say to them. Ever since she lost her temper, Shauna carrying her out of the room, like a fucking toddler throwing a fit. The second her ass hit the bed she realized what she’d done. She needed to be better.

This morning cemented that for her. Lottie shouldn’t have been in a position where she could act out of panic like that. They needed to take care of each other, not tear each other down. And Jackie had been setting a horrible fucking example.

“Oh, lord, here we go,” Tai groaned.

“I think a check-in is certainly called for, Jackie,” Misty said enthusiastically, leaning in towards Lottie so she could see Jackie better.

Lottie kept her head on Nat’s shoulder, but tilted it to give Misty a bemused look.

“Is this a Jackie Taylor pep talk?” Nat asked with a hint of a smile.

Jackie grinned at her, shrugging her shoulders.

“I think that’s exactly what this is,” Van answered.

She winked at Jackie and moved her hand from Tai’s knee up to her shoulder, rubbing at it just like Jackie had done for Shauna moments before.

“Is it weird that I sort of missed these?” Nat laughed.

“No,” Lottie sighed, “she’s usually annoyingly right about this shit.”

Jackie pulled Shauna’s hand onto her lap, resting it on her thigh. She started fidgeting with it, tracing shapes with her nails lightly, running the tips of her fingers up and down it.

She used to do this during their locker room talks, if she had to broach a hard topic, if someone was being a bitch or someone needed to step up their game. Instead of wringing her own hands or twisting her jersey, she’d sit next to Shauna and Shauna would plant her hand on the bench between them and Jackie would draw stars and hearts on her skin and run gentle fingers over her nails, feeling for chips in the polish while she talked.

Shauna glanced at her. Her eyes were glassy. Jackie quickly leaned in, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“Hey,” she whispered in Shauna’s ear, the chatter of the others masking it, “I love you so fucking much.”

“Love you,” Shauna replied quietly.

Her voice sounded thick. She wasn’t going to talk much if she could help it. She wouldn’t open her mouth long enough to risk crying.

“Okay, first things first” Jackie swiveled back around, “we need to treat each other better. We need to stop fighting.”

“Says you,” Lottie mumbled, leaning further into Nat.

Nat grimaced, glancing between her and Jackie. She looked uncomfortable, her leg bouncing and hands folded in her lap. Jackie closed her eyes and took a deep breath, shoving down the anger welling in her stomach.

“Lottie,” Jackie said calmly, “I’m sorry that I hit you.”

Lottie stared at her expectantly.

“And… scratched you and whatever else I did. I shouldn’t have—”

“You had a right to be pissed, Jack,” Van interrupted.

“Jax, you shouldn’t have to—” Shauna insisted at the same time.

Jackie shook her head at Van just slightly and drew a line up Shauna’s arm slowly, hitting her elbow and tracing it back down to her hand. They both quieted.

Lottie wasn’t going to apologize to Jackie. Not for lying, not for Jackie’s pain, certainly not for Shauna’s. She might one day, but it wasn’t going to be now. It wasn’t going to be in front of everyone, while the cuts Jackie had left on her arm still stung and she’d just done the most impulsive, reckless thing she had in decades. Lottie was spiraling and Jackie needed to do whatever had to be done to pull her out of it, because the group was fucked if she lost her shit completely.

“I am sorry,” Jackie repeated. ‘I mean it. I don’t think I was… I’m not saying that I didn’t have a good reason, but I shouldn’t have done that.’ Shauna squeezed her thigh. “So… I’m sorry.”

“Thanks,” Lottie mumbled sitting up straight and crossing her arms.

She looked like she wanted to say more, rubbing her lips together and staring at Jackie nervously. Jackie waited a moment, but Lottie shifted her gaze, glancing out the window.

“We’ve all hurt each other,” Jackie continued. “Back then and this week. And I know we all have good reasons, but we’ve got to stop. We have to start trusting each other. Like it or not, we’re linked. We either get out of this together or we all go down.”

“I could find some trust activities for us to do, Jackie,” Misty offered. “We could make an evening of it and—”

“Jesus, Misty,” Nat said indignantly.

“Yeah, no,” Tai said, “Jackie’s right. We need to get along. But I draw the line at fucking team building exercises.”

She turned in her seat, back to the window, and let her feet rest in Van’s lap. Van rubbed one hand up and down her shin absentmindedly, holding Tai’s hand in the other. Tai barely seemed to notice—she was clearly exhausted. Shauna was right, there was no way she’d been sleeping. There were dark circles under her eyes and she kept letting her head fall back, eyes shut for long intervals. Her willingness to relax like this in front of all of them was enough of an indicator that she was absolutely beat. Jackie noticed Shauna checking on her periodically in the rearview mirror.

“Thanks for the offer, Misty,” Jackie said gently, “but I think the best thing for us to do this evening is take a break from each other. We’ve spent a lot of time together, talking about really… dark shit. None of us have rested enough. We need to get to the house and settle in.”

There was a grumble of agreement.

They were headed to one of Lottie’s properties. Jackie’s favorite one, on the coast in Maine. They’d been through a lot there, the three of them. It was their safe place, their solace. It was the only place in the world she wanted to be right now.

Jackie knew they’d have to talk more —tell more hard truths and strategize and figure out where to go from here— but tonight she was taking Shauna to the corner bedroom, the one that had the view of the garden rather than the beach, and she was going to lock the door and they were going to be together. Just them, no interruptions.

It was too much, juggling their reunion with everything else, and they needed one fucking night where they pretended the world wasn’t crashing down around them. Jackie was going to give them that, come hell or high water. And so far, their hell and their high water had been mostly presenting itself in the form of unnecessary homicide.

“What’s the second of all?” Van prompted, tapping Jackie’s shoulder gently.

“Right… the second of all is that we really really have got to stop killing people. I understand some murder, but nine in the span of a few weeks is just way too much, guys.”

“Some of those were justified,” Shauna mumbled under her breath.

“Not yours!” Lottie snapped. “Well… not one of yours anyway.”

“Oh please, I don’t need a fucking lecture from you right now, Lottie,” Shauna said sternly. “Not while the body of that bellboy or whatever the fuck he was is still warm.”

“I highly doubt it’s still warm,” Misty said.

“Bellboy?” Van asked incredulously. “Are bellboys even a thing anymore? Where’d you even get that from?”

“Okay!” Jackie interrupted, tracing triangles on the back of Shauna’s hand. “It doesn’t matter whose murders were better or worse than others. The point is, we have a greater than one-to-one murder ratio and that is so excessive. We really need to turn it around.”

“I’m sorry,” Lottie whined, “but Shauna’s was way less justified than mine! At least mine was on topic.”

“Mine was self-defense, Lottie,” Shauna argued.

“Babe,” Jackie said dubiously, squeezing her hand.

Tai jumped in before Jackie could continue.

“What the hell are you talking about? He was unarmed and you literally stabbed to kill.”

Shauna pursed her lips and gave a noncommittal shrug.

“Mine actually was self-defense,” Lottie said confidently. “Or like… group defense.”

Nat stared at her, jaw hanging open.

“You’re all fucking insane.”

“Lot, you got… startled, just like Shauna did,” Van volunteered, graciously giving both of them an out. “But… that doesn’t make it self-defense.”

“We aren’t mad,” Jackie said evenly, “we’re just… disappointed.”

Nat sat up, leaning to the side to get a clear view of Jackie. Lottie’s hair caught on her shoulder and she brushed it back, wide eyes still locked on Jackie’s.

“Did those words seriously just come out of your mouth?”

“They did,” Jackie replied, choking down the laugh that was suddenly building. Her lips twitched up and Nat smirked back, shaking her head.

“Fucking batshit.” Nat sat back and perched her arm on the back of the seat, letting it rest behind Lottie’s shoulders.

“Yeah, it is,” Jackie conceded, “but honestly… what the fuck am I supposed to say right now?”

Van caught her eye, trying not to laugh, throat bobbing. Keeping a straight face while Van was looking at her like that was always a lost cause, no matter how serious the environment. They’d fallen into fits of giggles at a fucking funeral before.

A small laugh escaped Jackie’s lips. Shauna smiled at her, Van and Nat laughed with her.

“Listen. I know how insane this is,” Jackie said, “And we can’t change the past. So all I’m asking for is no more fighting with each other and, more importantly, no more murder as a first line of defense, okay? Not unless we really have to.”

“Sounds remarkably reasonable to me,” Tai sighed, sinking down further in her seat.

“Great talk, captain.” Nat gave a mock salute.

“I just want us to consider the circumstances before we kill anyone. Consult the group! We’re a team!” Misty said earnestly. “For example, I wasn’t even anti -murdering that man, but we needed a lot more information. If Lottie had asked me first, I would’ve suggested a simple threat, and then, depending on his reaction, a kidnapping. Not straight to murder. That helps no one.”

There was a brief moment of complete silence.

“That’s… yeah, good point, Misty,” Van offered, shrugging at Tai when she gaped at her.

“Yeah… yes, good point,” Jackie echoed. “I’m not sure I want to condone any kidnappings either, but… yeah, that’s the spirit of it. Not straight to murder. That’s the— that’s the main thing.”

Shauna snorted under her breath and Jackie chewed her lip to avoid laughing again.

“So…” Lottie hummed, “coffee?”

“I’m not going to remember all this shit,” Shauna grumbled. “Why can’t you guys have normal orders?”

They’d driven another half hour, until Jackie insisted Shauna pull off the highway because it’d been way more than twenty miles. Mostly they’d listened to the radio, Jackie changing the stations and keeping the volume relatively low. Tai actually fell asleep a few times. Van held her legs firmly in her lap and kept trying to soothe her into more than a doze, but she never slept for longer than a few minutes.

They were in line at the drive-through, Shauna already annoyed by the wait, and everyone was shouting their requests all at once.

“I’ll remember,” Jackie assured her, waving a dismissive hand when she opened her mouth to complain again. “I’ll order, baby, just relax.”

“Everybody shut up for a sec,” Jackie said loudly. They did. “Van, I know you just want black coffee, but are you hungry?”

“No,” Van replied, shifting in her seat as Tai took her legs off of her lap to sit up again. “Just coffee is good.”

“Did you eat at breakfast?” Jackie asked, staring her down, assessing her.

Pink tinged the tip of her nose. She was embarrassed by being questioned like this, but Jackie didn’t have another option. She looked genuine, though, when she doubled down.

“Yes, Jack, I ate breakfast.”

Jackie glanced at Nat, who nodded just once.

“Okay, Tai?”

“Iced quad shot americano with a splash of oat milk.”

She crossed her legs, foot swinging in quick little circles. She was so clearly amped, body wired on caffeine but mentally exhausted.

“How about a double shot?” Jackie countered.

“Excuse you?” Tai snapped. “How about you—”

“Okay, okay, triple,” Jackie amended. “How about a triple shot? You’ve had a lot of fucking coffee already.”

“Too much caffeine mixed with too much stress is a recipe for disaster for your heart,” Misty said, shoving her glasses up and leaning towards Tai.

“Jesus.” Tai jumped away from Misty. Van shot a hand out, resting it on her knee. She relaxed some. “If I get a triple shot will you sit the fuck back?”

“Don’t blame me when you get diaphoretic,” Misty shrugged, sinking back into her seat.

“Okay… Tai, food? They have a caprese sandwich I was gonna get, you don’t eat meat either, right?”

“Sounds good, whatever.”

Jackie finished taking everyone’s orders, Misty’s complicated drink of choice eliciting an eye roll from both Shauna and Nat. Everyone went back to talking in the background. Jackie could hear Van trying to encourage Tai to get some sleep.

When they were almost up to the speaker, Jackie unbuckled her seatbelt and leaned closer to Shauna. She rested one hand on her thigh and the other on the back of her seat. Shauna swallowed hard. Jackie couldn’t tell quite what it was about.

She’d almost cried earlier, when Jackie took her hand in her lap, but she seemed to have moved past that quickly. Then there was earlier earlier, when Jackie could’ve sworn Shauna wanted to… well, it really seemed like she wanted to get Jackie alone.

“And what about you?” Jackie asked, sliding her hand an inch higher and squeezing. “What do you want, baby?”

Shauna smirked, but kept her eyes on the car in front of them. She was breathing heavier, suddenly, her chest rising and falling under the thin cotton teeshirt she hadn’t meant to wear without something over it. She’d taken her sweatshirt off with a sigh when Lottie and Van had convinced Jackie to turn the heat on for them. Jackie could see the outline of her bra, the light blue material clinging to it.

Her hair was down, falling just past her shoulders. She’d stopped pinning it back. In nearly every picture Jackie had seen of her while they were apart, her hair was drawn back, away from her face in some way. Very casual, very busy mom. Very sweet, Jackie thought. It seemed like she was trying to distance herself from that image, as much as she could while they had everything else to deal with, and Jackie wasn’t sure if it was for Shauna’s sake or her own.

She was beautiful, always. Ridiculously so. Looking at Shauna could quite literally take Jackie’s breath away if she did it for too long. She remembered the other girls giggling about that line when they first heard it, used by some mediocre man in some silly rom-com during middle school, joking about how that wasn’t even possible. Shauna had told them it was hyperbole, rolling her eyes. And Jackie had thought no… it wasn’t. Not really. Not with someone who looked like her.

Jackie picked up a lock of Shauna’s hair, tugging twice. A signal they’d done when they were little, one Jackie occasionally used in their teens when Shauna was particularly spacey. Pay attention to me.

Shauna turned her face towards Jackie and, with the way Jackie was leaning over her, they were less than a foot apart. Shauna's eyes flicked down to her lips. Jackie slid her hand a little higher. Shauna gave her that cocky look she had, the one she'd perfected around the time they entered high school, one side of her face quirked up— a lazy half smile on her lips, a brow lifted, her cheek dimpling. Jackie felt her heart start to race.

"I said what do you want?" she repeated, playing with Shauna's hair mindlessly.

Shauna's face shifted into a real smile.

"I heard you. I was thinking."

"Always the thinking with you," Jackie mumbled, watching Shauna take her in, her eyes running up and down Jackie's entire body.

"Medium latte," Shauna said simply, once she'd refocused on Jackie's face.

They pulled forward and Jackie leaned all the way across Shauna's body to order. Much further than she really needed to, but Jackie would gladly take any opportunity to invade Shauna's space.

Shauna rewarded her, gripping her hip as if to stabilize her. As she ordered Lottie's extra-hot mocha, Jackie felt Shauna start to trace small circles on her hip bone, her thumb dipping below the band of her jeans, her seat obscuring everyone else's view of them. Jackie shivered, voice breaking for a second.

They pulled forward, Shauna passing everything straight to Jackie for her to dole out to the others.

"Here you go, hon," Jackie said, handing Tai her coffee and sandwich. "Okay, that's it, did everybody get everything?"

A grumble of agreement.

"I sure hope so, because we aren't stopping again." Shauna took a quick sip of her coffee, Jackie grabbing it when she was finished, situating it in the cup holder for her. "That took way too long."

"Jesus, you two," Nat grumbled. "Does anyone else feel like Jackie is playing mom and Shauna is playing dad?"

"Oh my god, yeah," Van nodded enthusiastically.

"If they're dysfunctional, mildly neglectful parents, sure," Tai yawned.

Shauna glanced at her in the rearview mirror and she shrugged, sipping on her already half-drank coffee.

"That is so not—" Jackie started.

"I don't know, I always thought Shauna was a little matronly," Lottie said.

"Matronly?" Jackie and Shauna snapped in tandem, Jackie swiveling in her seat to properly shoot Lottie a death glare.

"Maternal!" Lottie corrected quickly. "Maternal, I meant maternal. Sorry."

“Yikes,” Nat mumbled under her breath, patting Lottie’s shoulder.

“Jackie’s definitely the mom,” Van offered, redirecting things. “Lecturing us, making sure we eat, telling us she’s not mad, she’s just disappointed.”

They all laughed— even Tai, seemingly more alert than before.

“And Shauna’s the dad that doesn’t say much until it’s time to complain or beat your ass,” Nat chuckled, winking at Shauna when she turned to pull a face at her.

“Very fucking funny, Natalie,” Shauna said, some lightness to her tone. “I’m going to refrain from being an asshole and telling you your role in the fucked up family.”

“Oh, I know who I am, Shipman.”

Jackie flinched. She was never going to get used to that. At least not while Shauna’s last name was fucking Sadecki. Shauna took her hand.

“It makes sense!” Misty chimed in. “Shauna is a Capricorn, very dad energy.”

“You… Misty, you follow astrology?” Jackie blurted, making brief eye contact with Van and instantly regretting it when Van’s lips started to curl into a bemused grin.

“Oh, yeah! You’re a Libra sun, so mom energy for you. Very nurturing. Cancer moon, too, which is ultimate mom energy.”

Jackie and Van’s smiles melted away, both of them speaking at once.

“Why the fuck do—”

“You know her moon si—”

“I have all our birth charts done,” Misty explained, cutting them off.

“Hold on…” Shauna eyed Jackie nervously, “don’t you have to have detailed information on someone to do that shit?”

“I don’t even know my own zodiac planet crap, Misty,” Tai said.

“You need birth place and time,” Jackie answered, “which like… I’m not surprised you have that. Just… what are you doing with our charts?”

Misty fucking Quigley being into astrology, having their birth charts memorized, referencing that information. Misty being aware of anything remotely cosmic like that, believing in astrology, even if that was relatively mainstream, was setting off red flags for Jackie. Something felt deeply wrong about it. Van and Lottie seemed to agree, both of them directing their focus to Jackie, Lottie tearing at her cuticles and Van bouncing a knee.

“Oh, it’s just for fun,” Misty chirped, smiling a little too hard for Jackie’s comfort. “You aren’t the only lesbian in the world, Jackie. Other people know things too.”

“Are you a lesbian, Misty?” Nat surveyed her intently. “Cause I seem to remember you bringing a man home pretty recently.”

“Lesbian-adjacent,” Misty shrugged.

Jackie let the conversation die. She was being paranoid was all, but that was fucking easy to do when Misty Quigley was the subject.

Barely an hour passed before they stopped again, pulling into a rest stop for a quick break, agreeing to use the buddy system, no one going anywhere alone.

Shauna and Jackie were leaning against the hood of the car, waiting while everyone else peed or stretched their legs. Jackie couldn't fucking stand not touching her. It was like a compulsion, the need to be tangled up in her, so she pulled Shauna into her arms, hands planted on her waist. Shauna sank into her gratefully, face buried in her neck.

"You're gonna like the house," Jackie mumbled against her hair, breathing her in.

She ran her hand in big circles on Shauna's back. Shauna hummed against her in acknowledgment. She was still so tired.

"Our room is nice," Jackie continued, dropping kisses to the crown of her head between words, "it has… a king bed… and a bathroom attached… with a huge bathtub."

"God," Shauna moaned into her shoulder, "that's all I want."

"Mmmm," Jackie nodded, chin against the top of Shauna's head so that she was completely tucked into her. "And a balcony. There's a beautiful greenhouse. All raised beds. Lottie pays someone to keep it nice. You'll love it."

"I'll love anywhere, as long as you're there."

It would've been easy to laugh, to joke and call her cheesy, to smack her shoulder playfully and shrug it off. That's what Jackie would've done, normally. But Shauna meant it. Jackie could hear it in her voice. She meant what she was saying. She needed to say it out loud.

"Yeah," Jackie squeezed her tighter, "that's how I feel, too."

Shauna went to the bathroom next, Tai walking with her and Van taking her place next to Jackie. Van wrapped Jackie up in a bear hug, squeezing her tight. Jackie hugged her back, chin perched on her shoulder.

When they broke apart, Van raised a brow at her silently. Jackie knew her stress was written on her face. Van could see right through her.

"I need to call Rachel," Jackie explained before Van could ask, pulling her phone out of her pocket and fiddling with it, turning it in her hands. "I need to tell her I'm… done."

Van nodded slowly.

"Are you sad about it?" she asked, expression and tone neutral.

"No." Jackie shook her head. "Does that make me just fucking awful?"

"Nah, it makes you human," Van comforted, pulling her into another hug. "You have… too much going on right now. You can only feel so many things at once."

Jackie sighed, relaxing into her. For so many years, Van had been her safe place—the only person, really, who got it. She wasn't Shauna, no, they weren't even comparable in Jackie's mind. She was something else entirely… and yet just as necessary.

"I think I need to do it now," she groaned.

"Right now?" Van clarified, squeezing her shoulder.

Jackie pulled away.

"Yeah. It won't take long and… I need it to be done."

"Hop in," Van said, nodding in the direction of the car. "I'll stay out here, keep everyone away for a few minutes."

Jackie jumped in the passenger seat, pulling up Rachel's contact in her favorites and dialing. She answered on the second ring.

The gas station was empty aside from Jackie and Shauna. It wasn't secluded, exactly, but it wasn't off a main road either. The pump refused to lock into place, so Shauna was holding it, tapping an impatient foot.

They'd made it to the house just twenty minutes ago, Van and Nat immediately surveying the perimeter, looking for any obvious signs of tampering, and Misty mentioning something about checking for cameras.

They'd run the tank nearly empty getting there, because Shauna refused to stop a third time on the way. Someone needed to do a gas and food run, and Shauna had offered, assuming she'd be the one cooking for them. Van wanted to accompany Shauna instead of Jackie, worried about her being recognized, but Jackie convinced her to stay, reminding her that she was more likely to draw attention.

They'd left as soon as the house was deemed safe. Jackie hadn't wanted to linger. She knew prying herself away would be nearly impossible once she settled in, so she'd dragged Shauna back out the door before she could even take a look around. Lottie had a car in the garage, so if anything went wrong the others had a way out while they were gone.

Jackie hopped out of the passenger seat and walked around to Shauna, stepping in behind her. She wrapped her arms around her hips, pressing her forehead against the back of her shoulder.

"Hi," Shauna said curiously.

Jackie nudged Shauna's neck with her nose.

"Hi," she murmured.

Shauna let her head fall back just a little, shoulders dropping as she leaned her weight into Jackie. Jackie pressed a kiss to her neck and lifted the hem of her sweatshirt enough to rest a hand on her stomach.

Shauna gasped, grabbing Jackie's wrist suddenly. Jackie paused, holding her breath.

Maybe this was too much. Actually, maybe this was totally fucking insensitive. Shauna hadn't even been functional last night and she was probably just trying to fill the tank and get the shopping done and get the fuck back to the house and here Jackie was, trying to get into her pants. Of course Shauna had been handsy all day, she was emotional. She'd spent too long missing Jackie. She probably just wanted to cuddle up with her, not—

Never mind.

Shauna tilted her head to the side, exposing more of her neck, and guided Jackie's hand lower, until her fingers brushed her waistband. Shauna's breathing had slowed, gone deeper. Jackie went back to kissing her neck, lips brushing, teeth scraping, tongue soothing, listening to Shauna's contented little noises.

Until click— the tank was full.

Shauna didn't move. She kept one hand on the pump, one on Jackie's wrist, and whimpered when Jackie sucked on the skin just below her ear.

"Jackie," she groaned, "fuck."

Jackie smiled against her skin.

"Shauna?" she asked, running her fingers through her hair gently.

"Hmmm?"

"Wanna fuck me in the back of the van?"

Shauna went from immobile to comically quick, slamming the pump back into its holder and screwing the cap on the tank so fast she almost dropped it. Jackie giggled at her, sliding the door open. Shauna grabbed her hips from behind and practically shoved her in.

"Oh my god," Jackie laughed, "I'm not gonna change my mind if you give me a second to figure out how put the seats down."

Shauna grinned at her, shaking her head, as she slammed the door shut behind them. Jackie moved aside for her and she slipped through to the back row, sitting and motioning for Jackie to come closer.

"Come here," she whined when Jackie didn't move immediately.

Jackie squeezed between the two seats in the middle row, crouching so that she could kiss her, Shauna immediately opening her mouth to her, trying to tug her forward. Jackie resisted in favor of hooking her fingers under the bands of Shauna's leggings and underwear. Shauna lifted her hips automatically and Jackie broke the kiss to slide them off. It was a little awkward, her body bumping into the seats as she bent over, but she managed, tearing Shauna's sneakers off roughly when they got in the way.

Shauna pulled her closer by her belt loops, Jackie almost falling forward, catching herself with a hand against the back windshield.

"Off," Shauna insisted, popping open the button and tugging at the zipper.

"Are you sure you can?" Jackie paused, jeans and panties already down past her hips. "With your shoulder?"

“My shoulder is fine, fuck my shoulder,” Shauna said quickly, trying to wriggle her way to an angle where she could reach them herself.

Jackie shoved her back and finished shimmying them off, tossing them behind her with Shauna’s leggings. The second she was done, Shauna pulled her close. Jackie straddled her lap, sitting up on her knees, and before she could do anything else, Shauna’s hand was sneaking between her legs, lightning quick.

Shauna immediately slipped inside her, fingers crooking against her walls. Jackie’s initial shocked gasp gave way to whimpers, as Shauna’s thumb started brushing circles over her clit, her eyes locked on Jackie’s.

Jackie had never been big on eye contact during sex. It felt too intimate, too cloying, too… much. Except for when she was fucking Shauna. If you could call what they’d done back then fucking, and Jackie thought you could.

Jackie liked watching Shauna’s body move. She was transfixed by it— the way her breasts bounced when she was on top of Jackie, the way her hips circled down in one fluid motion, the line of her neck as she threw her head back. Jackie watched every inch of her.

Shauna was different with Jackie. She admired Jackie’s body, blatantly and without shame, but it was before they hooked up. It was part of the build-up. During, though, Shauna always watched Jackie’s face. It used to make her uncomfortable, made her worry and overthink, scared she would relax too much and stop looking pretty and ruin everything.

But Jackie quickly learned that the more she let go, the more into it Shauna was. Shauna would pant with her, her eyes would flick between Jackie’s own and her lips, she’d get more turned on from watching Jackie’s expressions than just about anything else they did.

Shauna would reassure her, encourage her to keep her eyes open and her face turned towards her, mumbling sweet nothings. My pretty girl. So fucking beautiful.

When Jeff said things like that —and they weren’t actually like that, Shauna was good with her words, she made Jackie needful and desperate, Jeff was clumsy and embarrassing— he wasn’t talking about Jackie’s face. He was talking about her boobs or her ass or the way her mouth looked while he shoved his dick into it.

Jeff wanted her to stay pretty, like a doll. Shauna wanted to watch her transform. She wanted to see her grit her teeth and screw her face up and roll her eyes back in her head.

Everyone after Jeff and Shauna had been somewhere in between them on that spectrum, but Jackie had never found another woman who made her feel completely comfortable letting go.

The last time they’d done this, Shauna didn’t have a clear view of her face. She’d gone down on her, head buried between her legs, sneaking glances up at her. Then she’d been on top of her, leaning back to get the right angle, her own thighs obscuring her view. But this time, Shauna was making damn sure she could watch her. She cupped Jackie’s jaw with her free hand, holding her in place.

“God,” Shauna moaned, sliding her fingers all the way out before slamming them back in, “you’re so fucking wet.”

“Mhmm,” Jackie hummed, nodding. “I have been for— oh, fuck— for hours.”

“Jesus,” Shauna hissed.

She was moving efficiently, clearly trying to get Jackie to the edge before someone interrupted them. The pressure she was using on Jackie’s clit was almost overwhelming, teetering right on the brink of too much.

It would’ve been too much if Jackie hadn’t spent most of the day aching for her, but Shauna seemed to understand that she could push Jackie further right now. That she’d been left waiting and wanting and desperate, that she could take it hard and fast.

Jackie was unsteady, thighs already starting to shake around Shauna’s hand. Shauna studied her face carefully, taking her in, just as she’d expected her to.

“Shauna,” Jackie braced herself with hands splayed across Shauna’s chest, “God, fuck yeah, baby, just… just like that. Holy shit.”

Shauna was concentrating, eyes slightly narrowed and bottom lip pulled between her teeth, and she looked so fucking hot and so fucking enamored that it made Jackie feel lightheaded. Tension was building in her abdomen, knotted and low, and Jackie wanted to let go.

But Shauna’s gaze was intense and it’d been so long since anyone had really looked at her this closely and Jackie couldn’t turn off that little part of her that was consumed with what Shauna was seeing right now and whether it was good enough. Whether she was good enough.

“I missed you so fucking much,” Shauna said softly, pulling Jackie back into the moment, her hand wandering off of Jackie’s jaw and into her hair. She cupped the back of her head, rubbing a thumb over her scalp.

Jackie groaned and rocked her hips against Shauna’s hand. Shauna started fucking her harder in response, fingers moving deeper.

“Me— fuck—” Jackie gasped frantically for air, “me too, baby.”

Her eyes rolled shut. Shauna’s thumb let up slightly, a subtle change, but Jackie noticed it, whining and bucking her hips in protest.

“I want you to look at me when you come,” Shauna murmured. “I need to see you.”

Jackie obeyed, opening her eyes slowly. She gripped Shauna’s sweatshirt with both hands, clinging to the material.

“There she is,” Shauna smiled, free hand slipping behind Jackie’s neck to prevent her from throwing her head back— another thing she always used to do. “You’re so fucking beautiful, Jax.”

Jax. That pushed her closer to the edge, her desperate string of pants and whimpers melting down into one long moan, walls contracting around Shauna’s fingers. Shauna drew her thumb in quicker circles and Jackie let out a strangled cry, thrusting haphazardly against her.

She let go of the last bit of control she'd been exerting over her features, brow furrowing, jaw working, entire face tense with anticipation. Shauna looked truly happy as she watched her, maybe the happiest she had this entire week, which was so very Shauna of her.

Jackie's entire body shook and she dug her hands into Shauna's shoulders, struggling to hold herself upright. Shauna nodded, moaning with her, encouraging her.

"Let go," she sped up, movements blindingly fast. "Let go, baby."

"Oh, fuck, Shauna!"

Jackie came hard, drawing in a sharp breath as the pleasure shot through her, every inch of her electric, every muscle shaking. Her abdomen kept twitching, even after Shauna pulled her fingers out of her and wrapped her arms around her waist. Jackie collapsed, sinking into Shauna's lap, burying in face in the crook of her neck, trying to calm her erratic breathing. Shauna rubbed her back lightly, as she clung to her.

The sound of a car pulling up startled them, Shauna reaching out to click the lock on. Jackie lifted her head off of Shauna's shoulder to peer out the windshield, watching as a newer sedan pulled up to a pump on the opposite side of the station.

"Fuck, we should—" Shauna started.

"Uh-uh," Jackie interrupted, sliding off her lap. "Just lay back, they won't see."

Shauna's eyes widened and she bit her lip. Jackie just smirked at her, guiding her backwards.

Jackie trailed behind Shauna as she pushed the cart through the aisles, grabbing things as if she knew where they'd be, as if she shopped here every day and had a mental checklist she was ticking through. She kept pushing her hair back off her face, trying to get it to stay put behind her ears.

Jackie watched her hands move. She still wore the opal ring on her right hand, but she'd taken her wedding band off of her left. Jackie noticed it when they'd come into the room to wake her and Tai. Her finger had an indent where it'd been.

Fast. They were moving fast, by anyone's standards. Stupidly so. Uhauling, Jackie would've told anyone else in this situation. Jackie was a bit of a serial monogamist, but she wasn't quick to jump. She couldn't afford to be and, honestly, she'd never had any desire to until now.

Everything Shauna did felt different, more… right than anyone else. The way she looked at her, the way she touched her, the way she fucked her. Dear god, the way she fucked her. Jackie had been with plenty of women who were good in bed. It wasn't like she'd been left wanting for good sex.

But this? With Shauna? This was so beyond anything else. It had to be something about who they were. The way they'd always slotted together, the way they were meant to be intertwined.

Shauna leaned forward, turning apples over in her hands, checking for bruises as she set them in the cart.

“Is it different for you… with me?” Jackie asked suddenly.

Shauna stopped, looked at her questioningly.

“Is what different?”

“Ya know…” Jackie murmured quietly, “the thing we just did?”

Shauna glanced around them. No one was paying them any attention.

“Sex?” she mouthed, brows lifted in amusement, a smile creeping in.

“Yeah… is it… like did you ever find anyone—”

Jackie blushed, twisting the sleeve of her sweater. She was nervous suddenly, aware of the fact that she might be completely alone in this, that Shauna might look at her like she was out of her mind for this.

“—God, never mind. I don’t know what I’m even asking.”

She looked down, studying the checkered tile. When she tried to start moving through the aisle, Shauna tugged on her arm.

“Hey, I know what you’re asking,” she said earnestly, slipping her hand into Jackie’s. “You just caught me off guard by asking it here.”

Shauna grinned at her and Jackie smiled sheepishly, chewing on the inside of her cheek.

“It is. It’s… insanely different,” Shauna answered reassuringly, squeezing her hand. “We didn’t even do this before and I feel like… I don’t know. I feel like we did. I feel like I knew what it could be and I was comparing everything to this the entire time and… nothing ever came close.”

“Yeah,” Jackie breathed, relief flooding through her. “That’s exactly it.”

Shauna nodded, tucking Jackie’s hair behind her ear.

“Can we keep shopping or…?”

“Yes, yeah,” Jackie agreed quickly, dropping her hand and resuming her place at Shauna’s heels.

She added things to the cart occasionally, but mostly she just watched Shauna. She was, in this environment, so clearly a mom. This was rote for her, thinking through the meals she’d need to make. Jackie mostly snacked through the day, living on premade food. She shopped at Trader Joes, Whole Foods, wherever she could buy bagged salads and prechopped stirfry mix and frozen dinners.

Shauna was counting bell peppers when Jackie spoke again.

“You took your ring off,” she said simply.

Shauna froze, hovering over her selection for a few seconds, before she picked it up and placed it in the cart slowly. She stood up straight, expression unreadable. Jackie’s hand was

resting on the handle of the cart, and Shauna placed hers over it. She sighed— that little shallow sigh she did. Not frustrated, exactly, but something close.

"Yeah, I did."

"Are you… feeling good about that?" Jackie pushed.

Shauna chuckled, shaking her head. She wrapped her arms around Jackie's neck and Jackie automatically rested a hand on her waist, frowning as she waited for an answer.

"Sweetie," Shauna sighed, "I feel like I really do want to have this conversation with you. Just… not while I'm trying to meal plan for seven grown women. Not under fluorescent lights in the fucking vegetable aisle."

"Okay, okay," Jackie conceded, giggling a little, "I suppose that's fair."

Shauna looked around them again before grabbing her cheeks and pressing a quick kiss to her lips.

They'd made it to the frozen aisle, Jackie piling bags of fruit in the cart, when Shauna bumped her shoulder against Jackie's, grabbing her attention.

"I… I mostly feel good about it, though," she said, when Jackie met her eyes. "I— it's complicated. It's… twenty years. But… I love you, J—."

Shauna caught herself, shutting her mouth quickly and recalibrating. She was still trying to get used to not saying Jackie's name in public.

"I love you," she repeated.

"I love you, too," Jackie answered, "and… I broke up with Rachel earlier. Officially, I mean. Called her and told her I wasn't coming back."

"You… when?" Shauna blinked at her, taken aback.

"At that rest stop. Earlier today," Jackie explained. "I'm… in this. Like, really in this, baby."

"Yeah," Shauna said breathlessly, lips curving up into a small smile, "so am I. But babe?"

"Hmm?"

"Can we maybe… hold off on these talks until we're back? I feel like we're sort of… I don't know, going to remember these moments," Shauna said quietly, cheeks going red. Her hair fell in front of her eyes again and they both reached up to push it back at the same time, Jackie beating her there. "And I'd just… much rather they be in bed or on that balcony or something than…"

"Than in the grocery store, yeah," Jackie finished for her.

Shauna nodded and they kept moving, Jackie watching Shauna appreciatively from behind, counting the minutes until they could lock themselves in their room.

The whole town was old money. Picturesque— rocky shores and sweeping cliffs, the smell of salt enveloping you the moment you stepped outside. But Lottie's house, the one Van and Jackie lovingly referred to as The Manor, was something else entirely, pretentious enough that even Jackie felt out of place the first few times she visited.

It was some sort of English victorian, Lottie waved a dismissive hand whenever guests asked her for more architectural detail than that, bay windows and peaked turrets, perched near the edge of a steep slope —not a cliff, exactly, you could walk directly down to shore if you were careful— but the effect was the same when you were looking at it. It was secluded, winding unmarked roads leading to it, a large stretch of private beach below.

Jackie hadn't given Shauna a proper chance to take it in when they dropped everyone off, hurrying her along, postponing this moment.

The house was… a presence. There was something magnetic about it. So Jackie had expected this, Shauna sitting in the car, cocking her head, leaning over the steering wheel for a better view. They'd gotten back a few minutes ago, long enough that Jackie was beginning to fret about their outing, internally scolding herself for her lack of caution, her complete lack of willpower whenever Shauna was involved.

Shauna sat back, shaking her head slightly.

"It looks like… it looks like something out of Rebecca."

"Yeah," Jackie agreed breathily, pulling herself out of her thoughts, "it does. What was it called? Mannerly?"

"Manderly," Shauna mumbled.

Jackie hummed, let another moment pass in silence before speaking.

"I know it's… a lot. The first time I saw it I was shocked. Really."

Shauna reached blindly for Jackie's hand as she shifted her gaze to the greenhouse. Huge, in its own right, made up of glass squares stained every shade of blue, rosemary planted by its door, just like the doors of the main house.

"How many times have you been here?" Shauna asked, finally turning to face her.

"Oh, lots," Jackie said, pulling Shauna's hand between both of her own. "I lived here for a while, actually. All three of us did."

Shauna didn't push for more. She just made that little face, the one she made when she was cataloging something new about Jackie.

"I'll show you everything, baby," Jackie promised, lifting her hand to press a kiss to the back of it. "You ready to go in?"

"Yeah," Shauna murmured, swinging her door open. "Let's go."

16. everything about you

2002

Jackie got there first, throwing the windows open to let the early summer breeze in. Ten months. That's how long it'd been since she'd seen Van.

Before that, Jackie couldn't remember a time where they'd gone ten days. Not even over summers when they were in high school, when there were preseason practices and house parties and sleepovers at Lottie's.

And since the woods? Well, after that they rarely went ten hours without seeing each other. They'd been attached at the hip, sharing a bed most nights, staying up until dawn when one of them had a particularly gruesome nightmare.

That's why the lines got blurred in the first place. That's why Jackie had crawled into bed with Van, both of them drunk on too much Jack Daniels, and laid right on top of her, rather than tucked into her side. That's why Van had cupped her cheeks and stared up at her like she was her whole world. It's why Jackie had leaned in and kissed her. And it's why Van had kissed her back.

It wasn't like it was bad. They loved each other already, they found each other attractive, they were compatible. They couldn't find a good reason to stop, once they'd started down that path.

They just weren't in it. They weren't meant to be together like that, which was so hard to understand. Because they were meant to be together—cosmically aligned, deeply connected. Just… as friends.

It might've worked, even, if they weren't so in love with other women. Every time they kissed, Jackie closed her eyes and saw Shauna hovering over her. She imagined rougher fingers moving over her skin and a darker head of hair between her legs. She knew Van was doing the same. They were taking their real bond and shifting it, morphing it into something they could use to play pretend.

The fear of loss ran deep in both of them. It took all hell breaking loose to shake them apart. Shauna engaged, Jackie spiraling, and —Van didn't know this piece— someone looking for Jackie. Jackie convincing a man to walk into a trap. Shooting him. Watching his skull break open. Feeling the splatter of his blood. Burning his body.

The breakup itself was as amicable as it gets. It was a relief. But with everything else complicating it, Jackie had moved to Berlin to stay with Lottie. Jackie had left Van.

They'd talked on the phone most nights, but there was a disconnect between them that hadn't been there before—Van's voice caught in her throat, it slurred with too much booze, it slipped lower and slower with too many downers.

Jackie had booked a flight back to the states, demanding Van come stay with her, telling her that she missed her so much it hurt. And that was true. She missed everything about her.

Lottie wasn't Van—she wasn't sweet and soft. They didn't share the same love, pure and protective. Beneath Jackie and Lottie's love was something sharp and jagged, the memory of hate.

The other reason Jackie got on a plane from Berlin, the reason she hadn't yet shared with Van, was that she knew Van was using. Jackie Taylor knew the voice of a woman on narcotics, even if the words tumbling out of her mouth were honey-sweet rather than venomous.

Lottie confirmed her suspicions, after Jackie plied her with enough red wine to loosen her tongue. Van was afraid to come to Jackie for help, Lottie said, afraid the revelation would hit too close to home. Van truly believed that Jackie would leave her for good.

That alone was enough to put Jackie on the first flight out of Germany.

Van agreed to come, putting up a small argument about the bartending job she didn't want to quit, before Jackie cried and she caved. She didn't fly, so she packed up her beat-to-shit Subaru and drove it across the country.

She'd be there any minute.

Jackie was terrified. She didn't want awkward. She didn't want small talk or reserved touches or tentative glances. She wanted Van back, how they were before.

A car pulling up, a door slamming shut.

Jackie ran towards the front of the house, skidding to a halt in the entryway. The lock clicked and Van threw the door open. She looked thinner than the last time Jackie saw her, hair pulled back in a low ponytail, eyes wide. Nervous and skittish and Van.

"Jack."

Her name was a sigh of relief from Van's lips.

Jackie launched herself toward her, arms locking around her neck. Van caught her by the waist, squeezing her tight, Jackie's feet lifting right off the ground with the momentum of it. Van smelled like cigarettes and coffee and, when Jackie buried her nose in her hair, lavender. She smelled like home.

"I missed you so much," Jackie sobbed, tears falling sudden and fast down her cheeks.

"I missed you, too," Van answered, voice just a bit shaky.

"You've lost too much weight, Jackie," Van rarely used her full name. It only came out when she was being stern, when her stubborn protectiveness was in full force. "You have to eat. Please."

They'd talked for two hours straight, catching up, reassuring each other that they were going to be okay, that they could go back to how it was before. Van had led them into the kitchen, Jackie at her heels chatting about the next memoir she'd been picked up to write, fully breaking every clause of her NDA. Van had thrust a plate at her, half the leftover Thai

food she'd picked up on the way. Jackie had tried to decline casually, but Van clearly wasn't going to play games today.

"It isn't—" Jackie huffed, crossing her arms, "It isn't about the weight, you know that. I just can't… I don't want it. I'm not hungry."

Van shook her head, staring down at the plate. Her jaw was set, goosebumps pricked at her skin, the fine peach hairs on her arms stood up. There was a thin sheen of sweat across her brow and she was shaky, gripping the counter to try and mask it. To the untrained eye, it might look like anger, but Jackie's sense for these things was keenly developed.

Jackie placed a hand over Van's–the first time they'd touched since their initial hug. It broke Van's control. She started crying, silent tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Hey, hey," Jackie murmured, lifting Van's hand off the counter so that she could slip herself under her arm and squeeze her around the middle, "I'll eat, honey. It's okay."

"It isn't just—" Van cut herself off with a sob.

"Sit with me," Jackie instructed, pulling her down to the ground.

They leaned against the island. Jackie wrapped her arms all the way around Van and held her close, counting her shuddering breaths. She let thirty exhales pass before she spoke again.

"Tell me what's going on, angel."

Van lifted her head away from Jackie's chest, wiping at her tear-stained cheeks. Jackie kept one arm resting on her waist, even as Van turned to face her. Her striped tee had lines of sweat bleeding into it. She looked paler than normal, reddish-brown freckles standing out against her skin.

Van took a great, gasping breath. She was steeling herself, putting on a brave face. Jackie rubbed her back and tried to look at her with as much love as she could manage, desperate to communicate without words.

"I think…" Van gulped, "I think I'm withdrawling, Jack."

She looked hang-dog—blue eyes downcast, lips twitching, shame pooling just beneath the surface.

"Yeah," Jackie whispered, brushing a stray hair back off her face, "I think you are, too."

"You knew?"

"I can tell by looking at you, honey."

Van shut her eyes tight, lines pulling at the corners of them. Jackie kept passing her hand over her, smoothing back already tame hair.

"I'm so sorry," Van choked out, shaking her head frantically.

"Oh, Van," Jackie tilted her face up with a finger crooked under her chin. Van opened her eyes reluctantly. "You don't have anything to apologize for. Why are you saying sorry to me? I'm sorry. I'm the one who… the one who left."

“No, you didn’t do anything to–this isn’t your fault,” Van insisted. “I just thought… I was scared you’d be mad. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

Jackie pulled Van into another hug, rubbing wide circles on her back.

“Why would I be mad, angel?”

“Your… because I thought it would remind you of your…” Van trailed off, voice heavy with uncertainty.

Jackie sat back, gripping her shoulders firmly.

“You are nothing like my mother.” Van nodded, throat bobbing as she swallowed back tears. “Everything’s gonna be okay. We’re gonna figure it out, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Van breathed.

Jackie stood, offering her a hand.

“First, we’re gonna eat.” Jackie slid one of the plates towards Van and picked up her own fork, ignoring the nausea building in her stomach. Van flashed Jackie a small smile as she speared a piece of tofu. “And then we’re gonna go to sleep. Everything can wait until tomorrow.”

“Jack… would you wanna still sleep…” Van blushed, staring back at her plate.

“Oh, yeah. We’re sleeping in the corner bedroom. Just like always.”

“It’s not weird, right?” Van asked, watching Jackie eat her bite of food carefully, like she was afraid she’d spit it out when she wasn’t looking.

“It’s not weird to me,” Jackie shrugged, swallowing, “we shared a bed long before anything else. Is it weird to you?”

“Nah, not weird to me,” Van agreed.

A few moments passed in silence as they picked at their food, until Jackie took her last bite and shoved her plate away.

“You know I’d never leave you, right?” she said, looping an arm through Van’s elbow and staring up at her. “I’ll always love you, no matter what.”

“I know,” Van mumbled, offering her a forced smile.

Jackie knew Van didn’t believe her. Not yet. But Jackie would do whatever it took to make sure she did one day.

PRESENT

“I’ve never cooked for this many people, but I can give it a shot,” Misty offered brightly, heading towards the walk-in pantry.

“Not you, Misty—”

“—yeah, gonna pass on that one—”

“Shauna!” Tai pleaded, cutting through the murmur.

She was laying on one of the couches, blue velvet with a tufted back. Van sat on the floor in front of her, Tai’s arm draped over her shoulder.

“Jesus,” Shauna groaned, shutting the last of the groceries in the fridge, “I already said I’ll make you guys dinner. Just not right this fucking second. We got plenty of snacks, you’ll make it a few more hours.”

Jackie dumped the bag they’d set aside in anticipation of this on the counter, bags of chips and boxes of crackers and stray pieces of fruit pouring out across the marble island. The surface was huge, six seats lined up on one side with a comfortable distance between them. They usually ate their meals there, rather than in the formal dining room with its high-backed chairs and heavy antique table.

“Here,” Jackie said, forcing a smile. Even she was starting to feel overwhelmed by the togetherness of it all— she couldn’t imagine how desperate Shauna was for a break. “To tide you over.”

“Everyone should pick their rooms and unload anyway,” Lottie suggested, pointing at the pile of luggage they’d formed in the middle of the room.

“The downstairs bedroom farthest to the right is mine. As far as upstairs goes, I’m assuming one of you wants—” Lottie gestured between Van and Jackie.

Van opened her mouth to speak and Jackie jumped in.

“If you try to take the corner bedroom, so help me God.”

“I was gonna say you should have it, Jack,” Van replied, rolling her eyes, “please, enough with the dramatics.”

“Wait a minute,” Tai said uncertainly, “why wouldn’t you each have your own room, if you’ve spent so much time here?”

She tapped Van’s shoulder, a little harder than was necessary to grab her attention.

Jackie could feel Shauna’s gaze on her. She made quick eye contact with Van, who scrunched her face before swinging around to face Tai, legs crossed under her.

“Well, when we first started coming here we were… uh…” Van trailed off at the sight of Tai’s expression.

“Yeah,” Shauna slammed the glass she’d been filling on the counter, a little water spilling out the top, “which you keep reminding us was twenty years ago. So, what? It sure sounds like you’ve been back since then, you just never sorted the room arrangement thing out?”

Jackie blanched, mouth opening and closing, trying to find the right words for this. Shauna was glaring at Van, which honestly pissed Jackie off because there was some kind of… patronizing bullshit in that, in her looking to Van rather than Jackie.

Van didn’t take the bait. She just sighed and looked back at Tai, who pushed herself up, sitting perched on the edge of the couch.

“Or was your timeline a little off?” Tai suggested, expression neutral, a hint of something sharp in her tone.

“Yeah, I don’t wanna be here for this,” Nat said, jumping down from her barstool. “Misty, let’s go pick rooms. Is the rest of the first floor good or are there any attachments there?”

“First floor is fine,” Lottie said, waving a hand.

She was standing in front of the fridge, looking for something, doing a fine job ignoring the exchange she’d set into motion.

“It’s been twenty years ,” Jackie continued. “There’s nothing there and there hasn’t been in forever.”

Shauna mumbled something, barely above a whisper. Her eyes were downcast, inspecting the dark wood floors.

“What, baby?” Jackie asked, chewing her lip and fighting the urge to reach for her.

“I said,” Shauna looked up at her, eyes glassy, “we’d been twenty-five. Time doesn’t… mean shit.”

“You’re right,” Van interjected, “time doesn’t mean shit. It isn’t time. It’s… us. We’re not… we weren’t…”

Her strong start petered out. She ran her hands through her hair, frustration clearly mounting. Jackie understood—she was frustrated too, trying to explain their relationship in so few words, with all of them exhausted beyond measure.

“We dated for one year. That’s it. And every second of that, we were thinking about you two,” Jackie said firmly.

Everyone turned to her, even Lottie, who had chosen a beer from the fridge and was pouring it in a tall glass. Van gave Jackie a small nod, begging her to continue.

“And we’ve been platonic friends for the twenty years since then. Years where, by the way, no matter how many women we dated, we were both still thinking about the two of you.”

Shauna’s face softened first. Tai was still mulling it over, focus darting from Van to Jackie like she was searching for something in the space between them.

“We’ve been through a lot together,” Jackie pressed on, “and we’re best friends. Seriously. Just best friends. This house is the place we come to when we’re… scared or depressed or freaking the fuck out. So yeah… a lot of the time we share a bed. Lottie, too.”

Lottie nodded her agreement, twisting the sleeve of her long cardigan between nervous fingers.

“I can’t tell you how many nights the three of us slept in Lottie’s bed together. It isn’t a Van and I dated once upon a time thing, it’s a… a we have a trauma bond and got used to sleeping next to each other thing.”

Tai was silent, but she visibly relaxed, swinging her legs up and laying back down. Van reached for her, setting her hand palm up on the edge of the couch, and Tai took it. Shauna

stepped closer to Jackie, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and dropping a lingering kiss to her forehead.

“That makes sense,” she gave Jackie’s shoulders a squeeze, “I’m sorry we—”

“No, no,” Jackie cut her off, fingers finding the opal ring on Shauna’s hand and twisting it back and forth, “I get it. I just wanted you to understand.”

“Everything Jack said is true,” Van added, flashing Tai an experimental smile, “but what she left out is the fact that the corner bedroom is also objectively the best bedroom in the house, other than the master, and we have been known to fight over it like dumb kids on occasion.”

Tai chuckled and Van’s face split into a real grin.

“As if it’s even a real fight,” Jackie said, rolling her eyes. “We both know I always get it.”

“Sounds about right,” Shauna agreed, smiling sheepishly.

She was looking at Jackie so intently. The look that said she’d give Jackie anything she wanted. A look of love— boiled down to its essence, concentrated, bottled and stoppered, saved for special occasions. Big love. Scary love. The kind of love Jackie craved.

“Way to blow my cover with the we’ve never stopped thinking of you line, by the way,” Van joked, snapping Jackie’s gaze away from Shauna’s. “I was trying to play it cool.”

They all broke into incredulous laughter, Shauna taking Jackie’s hand in her own and Tai turning onto her side, wrapping both arms around Van’s shoulders and pulling her closer.

“Oh my god,” Jackie giggled. “Well, if that’s what you were aiming for, you were not delivering.”

“No?” Van asked in mock seriousness. “I thought I was.”

She dropped her head back on the couch, smirking up at Tai.

Shauna was showering while Jackie unpacked their things. She wanted to make it nice. She wanted Shauna to feel the way she felt here—safe and at home, grounded. Jackie wasn’t normally one to unpack when she might need to bolt, but this house was different. She sprawled out here, sank into it, grew slow and sedentary.

Their clothes were hung in the wardrobe. The balcony door was propped open to let the stale air out, the salty breeze replacing it slowly. Lottie hired someone to clean twice a month, changing the sheets every time, so that they were fresh, just in case. Jackie had seen, up close and personal, the waste that came with Lottie’s kind of wealth, but she couldn’t say she hadn’t appreciated the readiness of the place every time she’s needed it.

Their phone chargers were plugged in by the bed, resting on the simple wooden nightstands. She turned the overhead light off, opting instead to supplement the natural light with the glow of the two bedside lamps. Their glass shades, deep mulberry in color, cast a reddish-purple shadow on the white comforter. Plants hung in the corner of the room—devil’s ivy, grown long and looped, hens and chicks in a blue planter suspended with dark rope.

She placed her tape player in the small drawer of the nightstand, stacking her books—the Dickinson and Emma— on top of it in a moment of boldness. She'd been embarrassed before, hiding them in the zipper pouch of her suitcase, hoping she wouldn't have to explain them. It felt silly now.

She'd almost finished unpacking. She lifted the shoebox of photos up, planning to set it in the bottom of the wardrobe, hoping Shauna wouldn't be reminded of its existence, but Shauna's journals were stacked beneath it. It was her first time seeing them.

The journal drew her in—she touched a finger to the frayed cover, pulling her hand away like it was something hot, actually feeling it sear her skin. All she could do was sit, staring at it, transfixed. She was in a tunnel, the walls closing in on her—no noise, no light, no other sensory input at all… until she felt Shauna pulling her away.

Shauna's arms around her waist, dragging her back a few feet, like she was separating her from something physically dangerous. Her hair wet and cold against Jackie's cheek and oh, Jackie was cold, too.

Shauna let go of her briefly, shutting the bag and kicking it away. The sound of the journals thudding inside the duffel pulled Jackie back into herself. She was crying, cheeks sticky, and shivering, the air gone crisper as clouds had rolled in.

Shauna slammed the balcony door shut and ran back to Jackie's side. She was in a bathrobe—one of two that stayed hanging in the ensuite. She dropped to her knees in front of Jackie, hands cradling her cheeks, terror on her face.

Oh shit.

"I'm—" Jackie tried to reassure her, but Shauna spoke at the same time.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, voice breaking at the end. "It was like you couldn't even hear me. You're freezing, Jackie. You can't… you can't do that."

"Oh, honey," Jackie murmured, Shauna looking downright nauseous when her teeth chattered, "I got… I got distracted. I'm f–f–fine."

Shauna sobbed, just once, before pulling it together. She ran a thumb across Jackie's temple, searching her eyes.

"Let's get in bed," she said, pulling Jackie up.

Shauna brought the covers all the way over their heads once they'd laid down. She tried to pull Jackie into her chest, but Jackie resisted, instead pressing her forehead to Shauna's and her hands to her chest. Shauna wrapped an arm low around her hips.

She warmed up quickly, their body heat and breath caught under the heavy down blanket, but Shauna was still tense. Jackie made sure her hand was warm, brushing it against her opposite wrist to check, before wrapping it around the back of Shauna's neck.

"I'm okay," Jackie whispered.

She wasn't though, not really. Jackie was still reeling from seeing that stupid fucking journal and, now that she had her wits about her again, anger was creeping in. Shauna

clinging to it all these years—the horrible things she wrote, the pain it had caused for both of them.

Jackie wanted to scream at her to get rid of it, shake her by the shoulders, demand she burn it. But Jackie had gotten distracted and gotten cold, so she'd missed her chance. It was Shauna's turn to be upset again.

When Shauna opened her mouth to speak, Jackie cut her off. She could control her anger, but not if Shauna said one more fucking thing about it. Not if she looked at her with those big, innocent eyes and those sweet, full cheeks. Jackie slammed their lips together, bruisingly hard. Shauna squeaked at the force of it, but Jackie just moved against her, waiting for her to react. Shauna tried to pull back, humming something against Jackie's lips. Jackie held her in place, nudging her lips apart with an insistent tongue.

Shauna gave in, opening her mouth to Jackie, who was growing increasingly frantic, rolling her tongue deeper, knocking her teeth against Shauna's, pressing her body closer. She couldn't handle the questions. Shauna looking at her with worried eyes, her lip trembling, her needy hands searching.

All that worry way too fucking late, and Jackie having to cater to it. Somehow things had gotten so twisted around. Somehow Jackie was the bad guy and Shauna was the wounded party and Jackie couldn't do that right now so she was going to kiss her until—

"Ouch," Jackie yelped, bringing a finger to her lower lip. Shauna had bitten her. Not nipped, bitten.

"What the fuck, Shauna?" Jackie snapped, assessing the drop of blood that clung to her finger as she moved her hand away.

She sucked her lip into her mouth and pressed her tongue to the spot, holding it down to staunch the bleeding, tasting metal. Shauna threw the comforter off of them, her face and chest gone pink from the heat.

"What the fuck me?" she shot back. "What the fuck is going on with you?"

Jackie shook her head, closing her throat against the tears threatening to come on, and leaned back in. Shauna grabbed her jaw firmly, holding her head in place. Jackie glared, trying to maneuver out of Shauna's grip and towards her lips again, but she held steady.

"Baby, baby, stop," Shauna demanded. "Stop."

"Let go of me," Jackie sobbed.

Shauna did— immediately. She looked desperately sad, brow furrowed and lips pulled down in a frown.

"Why do you keep that—that— shit," Jackie choked out, burying her face in her hands so she wouldn't have to take in Shauna's wounded expression.

"Okay, I thought that's what—"

Jackie sobbed louder to halt Shauna's impending I knew it commentary.

"Oh, fuck," Shauna mumbled instead, "come here."

Jackie let Shauna pull her into her arms. She sobbed into her chest, gripping either side of the plush robe in shaking fists. Exhausted, suddenly.

“I kept them because I… didn’t have you,” Shauna explained quietly.

“That’s who I fucking am to you? That’s how you wanted to remember me?” Jackie tried to sound angry, to inject her tone with the same bite Shauna did when she was pissed, but it came out small, closer to a whimper.

“No, just…” Shauna sighed, took a pause. Jackie waited her out, wiping her eyes on the collar of the robe. “This is a big conversation and you’re tired, sweetheart. Are you sure you want—”

“I’m sure,” Jackie insisted. “I won’t sleep if we don’t.”

Shauna nodded, Jackie felt her chin bob against the top of her head.

“Can we sit up?” Shauna asked carefully.

Jackie shook her head. She couldn’t look at her right now.

“Please just… explain it to me,” Jackie begged. “Just tell me why.”

She kept her grip on Shauna’s robe, but used a thumb to rub little circles against her sternum. Shauna sighed again, but acquiesced, holding Jackie tighter.

“I wrote so much more in them. I kept writing about you. I wrote what was going on, yeah, but I… I wrote down every single thing I could remember about you. All of it.”

Jackie turned her head, cheek pressing against Shauna’s skin instead of her forehead.

“How you used to jump on top of me, like really, truly body slam me and knock the wind out of me. Sometimes even when we weren’t kids anymore.”

Shauna slipped a hand under Jackie’s sweater, fingers dancing over the skin of her lower back. Jackie sniffled, tears slowing as she listened to Shauna’s voice, felt the vibration of it in her chest.

“How you smelled like… like sweet and deep at the same time. Like… like fucking bergamot somehow, even though you never used anything with that scent and it never made any fucking sense. But you still smell like that. You still smell the same.”

Shauna’s voice was wavering. Jackie pressed a kiss to her collarbone, winding a hand through her hair. Every word she said was unraveling Jackie, chipping away at the frustration, soothing the anger.

“And when we were in the car… when you were lecturing everyone and you started playing with my hand, I felt like… I felt like I was gonna pass the fuck out, because I remember it. I remember you doing that. But my memory… Jax, I’m sick. I’m truly just… fucked in the head.”

Jackie finally pulled back, meeting Shauna’s eyes, one hand lingering on her chest and the other stroking her hair.

“Seriously. I lose whole stretches of time. I find myself in rooms that I don’t remember going into. There are entire years of Callie’s life that I— that are just fucking blanks for me.”

The anger was small now, sitting just in the center of Jackie’s chest, waiting to be snuffed out completely.

“But I—I remember everything about you and if I hadn’t written it all down and read it back so fucking often… who knows if I would and I couldn’t let—I didn’t wanna lose you.”

Guilt flooded Jackie, filling the gaps left by her anger’s sudden departure. Shauna wasn’t done.

“And if you decide to—” Shauna’s voice caught in her throat. She squeezed Jackie’s waist. “If you decide to end this—”

Jackie tried to interrupt, but Shauna shook her head gently.

“If you decide to be done with us, I don’t—I want to think that knowing you’re alive… knowing you’re okay would be enough to keep me from—But… I can’t know that.”

Shauna finally stopped, chest moving rapidly, wiping at her cheeks.

“I love you so much,” Jackie said, taking Shauna’s hand in her own and bringing it down between their chests. “I know why you’re scared. Really, I do. But… there were things I didn’t know either. There’s shit that changed for me, too. And now that I know, baby? Well, now you wouldn’t be able to get rid of me even if you tried. I can promise you that.”

Shauna smiled, just barely, and Jackie wished she could open her mind up to her, let her walk around and look at her thoughts up close and know that she meant it. She kissed her, trying to convey everything she needed to, Shauna’s lips moving slowly against hers, the opposite of the kiss Jackie had initiated earlier. A few minutes passed before they broke apart.

“We’re not even in the clear right now,” Shauna mumbled. ‘We’re still—I know we’re being really causal about this shit because we’re all so… fucked up, but someone could still,’ she gulped, closing her eyes for a moment, “hurt you.”

“Nobody is gonna be able to take me away from you. Not now that I have you back,” Jackie whispered, dragging her thumb across Shauna’s lip, “but I get it. I get—let’s just talk about it again when all of this is over.”

“Yeah,” Shauna agreed, shifting to get a better look at Jackie. “You look exhausted, baby.”

“Oh, thanks,” Jackie let out a surprised laugh, “you really know how to treat a lady.”

Shauna giggled, rolling her eyes.

“You’re beautiful. And exhausted. Both things can be true. I just think you need a nap,” she yawned.

She rolled onto her back, pulling Jackie into her side. Jackie tucked the covers tight around them, settling in.

“I need a nap, or you need a nap?” she teased, lashes already heavy with sleep.

“Mmm,” Shauna murmured, “does it matter?”

Jackie drifted off before she could answer.

Shauna had always been relentless. Running suicides until she was the fastest on the team. Pouring over books until she knew she'd set the curve. Pressing down with the side of a blade until she heard a reluctant pop. Relentless in her pursuits, always, and right now her pursuit was Jackie.

They'd woken up 45 minutes ago, Jackie stirring when Shauna tried to move beneath her without disturbing her. She'd felt surprisingly rested, their short nap recharging her more than she'd expected it to. Or maybe it hadn't been the sleep… maybe it'd been Shauna's robe falling open and her bare leg slotted between Jackie's thighs. Either way, Jackie had been awake in an instant.

Shauna sat with her back against the headboard, hips open to leave room for Jackie between them, chest flush to Jackie's back. One hand gripped Jackie's thigh, fingers digging into her carefully, pressing with the pads of them not the tips, forming bruises rather than scratches.

Jackie's legs were spread, feet planted on either side of Shauna's knees, and she was digging her head back as far as she could, letting the bone at the top of Shauna's shoulder press into the hollow at the base of her skull.

It reminded her of the chiropractor, just briefly—of neck traction. Laying on the cold padded table, a strap placed just so, pulling back to release the tension.

Except everything about this was warm—Shauna's breath and Jackie's skin and the sheets on their bed. All heat.

Jackie's thoughts were mostly fleeting—no shape to them, nothing she could grab on to, because Shauna's other hand was busy between her legs. Relentless.

Another thought—finally one she could take between her hands, one she could sink her teeth into.

Too much.

She was going to come crashing over the edge again, a third time. Three in a row, and not small little waves. Not the kind that ebb and flow and feel nice, but need to be examined to determine whether they tipped the scale all the way. Jackie had lost count of those a long while ago.

This tension building, this ache, spreading like something sharp, rippling through her limbs, would snap loose in her third undeniable orgasm in a row.

It's not that she wanted it to stop. She felt euphoric, transcendent . It's just that she also felt like this might be the end for her.

She knew it couldn't kill her, but it felt like it might. Like her chest had forgotten how to expand all the way, like her muscles might be stuck this tense forever, like her heart was hammering too quickly to pump her blood.

She tried to tell Shauna, but the words wouldn't come out. She couldn't even whine or moan anymore—all she could do was grit her teeth and choke on this feeling.

She used every ounce of strength in her to move her arm, reaching behind her, slamming the heel of her palm into Shauna's side over and over.

Shauna didn't let up.

"One more. Just one more."

A promise, not a request.

So Jackie held on. She squeezed her hands into fists and let her toes curl under and turned her face towards Shauna's neck, breathing in the smell of her—the floral shampoo Lottie stocked in the bathrooms and the salt from her sweat and from the ocean air clinging to her skin, and the deep, innate Shauna smell, the one Jackie couldn't describe in words.

Shauna pressed harder, pulling guttural sounds out of Jackie's throat. They died in her mouth, her lips still pursed against the indistinguishable pain and pleasure of it all. Shauna was panting, her own breaths uneven. Jackie dug her nails into her side, clinging to her, bracing herself, and the moan that Shauna gave in response sent her straight over the edge.

Jackie fell apart and it was heaven and hell all at once, Shauna groaning low in her ear. Every time she thought the wave was over, that she was going to be done, it built again, shooting up from her center all the way to her chest, forcing desperate sobs out of her. When the violent jerking slowed to twitching, Shauna's hand stopped moving but she didn't pull it away from Jackie's skin.

Jackie snapped her knees shut, Shauna finally relinquishing her contact, but Jackie couldn't be sure she was done with her, so she turned sideways, one hand on the top of the bed frame, the other around Shauna's neck. She pulled her body up and her knees to her chest, holding her weight so that she was hovering over Shauna's lap instead of resting in it, like she might try and climb up the wall to escape Shauna's reach.

Shauna caught her anyway, one arm behind her back, the other looped beneath her knees, and lowered her back down. Jackie curled up against her bare chest, snaked both arms around her neck, pressed her forehead to her temple. She kept choking on her inhales, air hungry, trying to breathe too deep.

"Shh shhh, it's okay," Shauna murmured quietly, "slow down, I've got you. Slow down, baby."

Shauna ran gentle fingers up and down Jackie's back, coaxing her out of it, until Jackie was done shuddering against her. She went limp, Shauna readjusting her grip to keep her upright.

"Wanna… lay… down," Jackie panted out.

Shauna listened, shifting them, helping Jackie to lay on her side. Shauna faced her, one hand tracing her cheekbone.

"Sheet," Jackie grumbled, reaching towards the foot of the bed, where it lay crumpled at their feet.

Shauna pulled it over their bodies. It felt cool against Jackie's skin. She yanked it higher, coving their heads so that they were cocooned together again, completely separate from the world. Shauna smiled, a small little thing. Nervous.

"Jax?" she whispered, a hesitant hand coming to rest on Jackie's waist.

Jackie had both hands tucked under her head, struggling to keep her eyes open. She tossed one leg over Shauna's in response, somehow more attainable than moving her arms.

"Are you… okay?" Shauna asked, holding perfectly still, as if she was scared to spook Jackie.

"Insane. I feel insane. I'm, like, dizzy right now," Jackie mumbled, halfway to sleep.

She could feel Shauna relax, her body sinking into the mattress, her hand heavier on Jackie's side. Jackie suddenly needed more of her, needed to feel that relaxation against her.

"Lay on me," she said, rolling onto her back and flipping the sheet back so that their torsos were uncovered.

"What?" Shauna asked, a hint of amusement in her voice.

"You heard me. Lay on me."

Jackie tugged at her shoulders until she rolled over, resting one arm and one leg on top of Jackie carefully.

"What the fuck is that?" Jackie laughed. "Get on top of me."

"Jackie," Shauna giggled, "I'll crush you."

"Oh, now you're worried about my well-being?"

"I'm always worried about your well-being."

"Shut the fuck up and come here," Jackie demanded, yanking on Shauna until she complied with a sigh. "You will not crush me."

Shauna's head was tucked under Jackie's chin, their legs intertwined. Skin to skin from head to toe, Jackie letting her arms rest on Shauna's back, Shauna's weight pushing her into the mattress.

"Yeah," Jackie murmured happily. "So… what was that?"

Shauna tensed against her and Jackie quickly clarified.

"No, are you fucking kidding me? It was incredible. Just… what—Something had to have prompted that."

Shauna pushed herself up on her elbows, placed on either side of Jackie's chest. Jackie kept rubbing her back, using both hands now.

"I don't know… you just feel so… alive when you're coming," Shauna blushed furiously, redder than Jackie had ever seen her, embarrassment assisted by exertion. Jackie raised an eyebrow for her to continue.

“Your face is flushed and you’re breathing heavy and I can feel every inch of you moving and you don’t stop making those little noises and… you just feel so… alive. I always liked that and now it’s… it’s just nice.”

“I love you. So much. But you need to slow your roll a bit ’cause I swear you’re gonna give me a heart attack,” Jackie grinned, earning a chuckle from Shauna. ‘That was fucking insane. You’re… that was amazing. I’ve never felt like that before.’ Shauna blushed deeper, somehow. “But that can’t be an all-the-time thing, because I’m like… wrecked right now.”

Shauna looked proud as hell, smiling back at her, now that Jackie had dismissed her uncertainty.

“I love you, too. So fucking much,” she mumbled.

Jackie laughed and pulled her back down, forcing Shauna to drop all of her weight back onto her. They laid together in silence, Shauna occasionally kissing Jackie’s chest lightly.

“Jax?” Shauna eventually asked, lips moving against her skin.

“Hmmm?”

“I have to go make everybody dinner.”

“No,” Jackie groaned, clutching Shauna tighter to her. “Those useless fucking bitches.”

“Yeah,” Shauna laughed, “but aren’t you hungry, too?”

“Well… yeah,” Jackie admitted begrudgingly, “I am.”

“Ten more minutes?” Shauna offered.

“Ten more minutes.”

“Pasta, Natalie,” Shauna sighed, rinsing vegetables in the deep copper sink, “it’s basic fucking pasta, because I don’t know what else I can feed everyone here. If you have strong opinions on the pasta, you are more than welcome to make it yourself.”

“No, no,” Nat said, leaning over Shauna’s shoulder to look at what she was doing, “I wasn’t saying I cook, I was just saying.”

Shauna glared at her until Natalie backed away with her hands raised in surrender. She hopped up on a barstool next to Lottie, who had her head perched in her hand. She was nodding off, chin slipping and jolting her awake every few seconds.

Jackie slipped in on her other side, resting a hand on her shoulder. Lottie jumped, blinking a few times before turning to look at Jackie. There were dark circles under her eyes, blue and purple splotches swirled together, and the gentle curls of her hair had turned to messy broken waves. You could always see the distress in Lottie, not just on her face or in her body language, but woven through her every feature.

Jackie leaned in, sliding her arm around her shoulders, and rested her forehead against her temple.

“Why don’t you take some meds and go to sleep for a while, honey?” she said quietly.

Lottie gave a few hesitant bobs of her head.

“Van and I will take care of the house,” Jackie added in a whisper, “don’t worry about it.”

Lottie startled her, turning suddenly to hug her properly, arms fitting snugly around her waist and head buried in her chest. Jackie met the hug, squeezing her shoulders.

“You know I love everyone, right?” Lottie asked, voice breaking. “You know its cause I—I just want everyone to be…”

“Shhh,” Jackie soothed, scratching her back gently.

Shauna made eye contact with Jackie, looking uncomfortable, chewing her lip and readjusting the cutting board in front of her nervously. Nat’s hand hovered over Lottie’s hair, like she couldn’t decide whether to touch her. Lottie sniffed and Nat closed the gap, fingers combing through her locks.

“We know, love,” Jackie assured her. “Nat, do you think you could help her up to bed? She has some meds in her nightstand that… they might help her sleep.”

“Yeah,” Nat agreed, as Lottie pulled away from Jackie, “let’s go, princess.”

Nat walked her upstairs, arms low around her waist. Jackie heard her murmuring something to Lottie as they left.

Misty was over by the built-in shelves on either side of the fireplace, dragging a finger along the spines as she studied the titles. Tai was back on the couch, this time in comfortable clothes—loose sweatpants and a crewneck sweater. Van had shoved a cushion under her feet and draped a blanket over her, but she was still fighting sleep.

Shauna had a clear view of her from the kitchen and she glanced at her every five seconds or so, scrunching her nose with worry. Jackie walked around to her and she set the knife down, looking at her questioningly.

“Oh, you can keep going,” Jackie said sweetly, wrapping one arm around her waist and resting her chin on her shoulder, “I just like watching you.”

Shauna rolled her eyes dramatically, turning her head away from Jackie. Jackie chased her, planting a kiss on her cheek and giggling.

“Okay, you two,” Tai groaned, “it’s getting gross.”

“Getting is generous,” Van grumbled, heading into the kitchen.

Shauna blushed and went back to her work, dicing an onion. Jackie watched her hands move, transfixed. Her right hand bringing the knife down in quick, precise motions, the opal on her ring finger catching in the light. Her left hand bare, a faint tan line where the gold band once sat. Jackie wondered when exactly she’d taken it off, what had been the deciding factor for her.

“They’ve missed each other,” Misty chimed in, shrugging as she pulled one of the books she’d been contemplating off the shelf.

“Jack,” Van said, leaning towards them from the other end of the island, “Lottie mentioned something about Charlie stopping by less. I was thinking we should check on the greenhouse before it gets dark, see if anything needs tending to.”

“Oh, yeah, I was thinking the same. Plus, babe,” she smiled at Shauna, “we can get some herbs for your pasta. Contribute to dinner.”

Shauna chuckled and Jackie winked at her.

“I can come help, if you want,” Tai offered half-heartedly.

“Oh, I really think you should focus on trying to sleep,” Misty said forcefully. She’d perched herself in an armchair by the fireplace and was staring at Taissa intently. “Going too long without rest is crazy-making, after all.”

“There’s no way I’ll sleep with you staring at me like that, Misty,” Tai snapped.

“That’s fine, I’ll go check on Nat and Lottie or something. Shauna can watch over you.”

“I don’t need watching o—”

“Tai,” Shauna interrupted. “I’d like the company. Misty can go upstairs, Van and Jackie can go do their gardening thing, you and I can stay here. If you doze, great. I can see you from here and I like knowing I’m not alone.”

Van smiled at Shauna gratefully. She shrugged in return.

“Fine,” Tai mumbled, turning onto her side. “But I’m not even that tired.”

“Be back in a bit,” Jackie announced, heading towards the back door, Van following at her heels.

“Just holler if you need us,” Van added before shutting the door behind them.

They walked down the path in silence, Jackie hopping side to side to step only on the pavestones, Van stomping straight through in her blundstones. The sky was darkening slowly, not quite sunset.

“It’s gonna storm,” Van commented, reaching the greenhouse and pulling up on the bar that held the double doors shut against the wind.

“Not tonight,” Jackie mumbled, looking out to the waves. They were building up to something—moving at an angle, breaking late on the shore, rising at odd times—but whatever it was, it wasn’t coming just yet.

Van held the door open, nodding for Jackie to go ahead of her.

“No, not tonight,” she agreed, “but soon enough, I think.”

“I think you’re right.”

Jackie walked through the center aisle of the room, pulling the cords to kick the three overhead lights on as she went. They were bare bulbs—Edison lights with swirling filaments, glowing so deeply yellow they were almost orange.

Van was already moving, making a beeline toward the cart they kept the tools in. She bent down to pull some sachets off of the bottom tray—simple, thin cotton, undyed. Jackie snagged the small clippers off the top of it, along with the black wire basket they used to harvest.

"So," Jackie said, trying to keep her tone casual, "how are you feeling about Shauna now?"

She busied herself, walking briskly to the rosebush, scared to make eye contact. Maybe she should've led into this, built up to it slowly, dipped a toe in before jumping. But she and Van had barely had a single fucking moment alone together and she needed to rip the bandage off. She couldn't handle the tension, Van hating Shauna, goading her until she snapped. She needed it to be over and, while it seemed like Van had made peace, she needed to hear it.

Van sighed. She placed herself near Jackie, standing in front of the chamomile.

"I… it still worries me, Jack. You know I'll always worry about you."

Jackie listened to Van's breath as she gathered petals, a few from each rose, dropping them into the basket as she went. She knew that Van would speak again if she gave her a chance, her inhales deeper than her exhales, like she was close to saying something with each breath.

"But I do think she's… changed some. Maybe not in general, but in how she… how she views you. I can see how much she loves you. I've always seen that. But she seems like she respects you more. And I…" Van trailed off, and Jackie looked up at her, watching as she placed a chamomile flower in each sachet. "I trust your judgment. I think you'll… keep yourself safe now."

Jackie smiled, eyes lighting up. Leave it to Van to know exactly what she needed to hear. And Jackie knew Van believed it, she wouldn't just placate her. Not about something this important. A second opinion, another vote of confidence for her own strength of will.

"Thank you," she breathed, tension she hadn't realized she'd been carrying leaving her shoulders.

Van chuckled and shook her head.

"What's funny?" Jackie asked, grinning, as she started on the thorns. She snipped them at the base, just a few from each stem, and dropped them carefully in the green velvet pouch that lay waiting at the bottom of the basket.

"Oh nothing, just waiting for you to gush about it. I know that was you testing the waters."

Van moved onto the mint, plucking leaves and shoving them directly in the right pocket of her slightly-too-big Carhartt jacket, the one Jackie had bought her the first full winter they spent at The Manor.

"I wasn't just asking so I could gush!" Jackie insisted, smile growing wilder. "I care about your opinion."

"I know you do, I'm teasing."

Jackie snipped four branches of verbena, laying them on top of the rose petals carefully.

“But… if you’re, like, waiting for me to—”

“Oh my god,” Van laughed. She was back at the cart, looking through the jars of dried herbs. “Dill or thyme?”

“Oh, always thyme. I hate the smell of the dill burning.”

Van nodded, twisting the cap off the jar and dumping some thyme into the mortar that sat on top of the cart. She bent back down, scanning the jars again.

“Okay,” Jackie said, practically skipping over to her, crouching at her side, “so if you’re dying to know, it’s like… amazing.”

Van grabbed the juniper, setting it on top of the cart without standing. She knocked her shoulder into Jackie’s gently.

“You feel good, then?”

“Oh, so fucking good,” Jackie sighed happily, plucking the rosemary and cedar off the shelves and standing. Van followed suit, grinding the thyme with the pestle. “I just… I know that this could all blow up, still. I know. But you know… I’ve spent so long looking for this. We’re just… it’s just good.”

Jackie knew she was skimming over the bad—the fights and the crying and the frustration, but even those parts didn’t really feel bad. Not truly. They felt cathartic, like stubborn old wounds that needed to be reopened to finally heal properly. She was more than okay with crying every day, if Shauna was the one there with her. She’d become so reluctant to fall in love. Flighty. Sometimes out of necessity, but… sometimes she just liked to run when things got hard. It was easier that way. Stay detached and move on at the first sign of trouble. But with Shauna, she wanted it all.

Van had finished grinding everything up. She dumped it in a spare jar and dropped it in the basket still hanging off of Jackie’s arm, before pulling her into a quick side hug and pressing a kiss to her forehead.

“You just tell me if it stops feeling good, yeah?” she said gently.

“Of course,” Jackie promised.

Van released her, adding coarse salt to the sachets of chamomile. Jackie walked to the farthest row of garden beds, dropping to her hands and knees to search under it, the rubber tile cold under her palms.

She started searching through the full water bottles stored there—some reusable, various shapes and materials, others plastic, bought in giant packs at Sam’s Club—all of them labeled neatly with a piece of tape across the front.

“Scorpio moon?” she called out over her shoulder. She twisted to look at Van, who was picking some oregano and slipping it into her right pocket.

“Definitely.”

Jackie slipped the bottle into the basket and stood, brushing off the knees of her jeans.

“Oregano?” she asked, tilting her head to the side. “What’s that for?”

“For the pasta, Jack,” Van said, pulling basil leaves off the next plant over. “Ready to head out?”

“Right! Duh.” Jackie grabbed a lighter and a book of matches off of the copper shelf that lined the wall on her way towards the door, Van already kicking it open. “Okay, I’m ready. You wanna do the carrying or the doing?”

“I can carry,” she offered, holding her hand out with a knowing smile. Jackie handed her the full basket gratefully. She hated drudging around with it, feeling weighed down by the heft of it, much preferring to keep her hands and her mind busy.

“Have I told you I love you recently?”

“All the time, Jack,” Van chuckled. “All the time.”

They made their way around the perimeter of the property quickly, both of them aware that they only had so much time before Shauna and Tai missed their presence. She kept the bag of thorns and the bottle of water in her hands, shaking some out of each every few feet. The sun was lower over the horizon, glowing a deep, saturated red.

“So…” Jackie said, stopping at the first of the four fire pits, situated at each corner of the land. “How are things? With Tai?”

Van blushed enough that Jackie could make it out, even in the low light. She set the water and thorns back in the basket, collecting enough rose petals to create a bed at the bottom of the small metal pit.

“We haven’t really… figured anything out yet.” Van handed Jackie the jar of ground herbs. Jackie took it, twisting the top off and sprinkling them over the roses. “But it’s… yeah, I mean, I think it’s good?”

Van was so good in social settings. Boisterous, friendly, lovable. People flocked to her, felt safe in her orbit, found her hilarious, always. She had every reason in the world to be confident in the way people felt about her, but it didn’t translate to actual comfort. She was perpetually uneasy, waiting for people to change their minds about her. Waiting for them to leave.

“She loves you so much. I know she does.”

Jackie handed her back the jar, trading it for a bough of verbena. She tossed it on top and struck a match, holding the flame to the flowers until they lit up.

“Yeah,” Van mumbled noncommittally. “Well… you know I love her.”

Jackie watched carefully as the fire spread down, the rose petals curling in the heat, burning from the edges in.

“Fuck yeah, I know,” Jackie laughed softly, nudging Van’s foot with her own, “but have you told her?”

“Not everyone moves as stupidly quick as you and Shauna,” Van teased. “The time just… it hasn’t been right yet.”

“Yeah,” Jackie sighed, “just… don’t let the time get away from you without saying something, angel.”

“I won’t.” Van looked serious, staring out over the water, watching as the sun sank lower. “It’ll be dark soon, we need to wrap this up.”

She pulled out a few of the mint leaves she’d stashed in her pocket, sprinkling them at their feet, before walking ahead of Jackie. Van was signaling that she was done with the conversation and Jackie needed to let her be, no matter how much she wanted to pry.

They moved on, working their way in a circle, until they finally reached the last fire pit, the one closest to the back door. Jackie was shivering, the cold really setting in now, and her hands shook as she lit the last match.

Just as the verbena went up in flame, a twig snapped behind them. Jackie and Van swung around, Van dropping the basket, gripping Jackie’s upper arm to drag her closer.

Misty and Nat, wrapped up in jackets, the heavy flashlight they kept by the door in Misty’s hand, both of them staring from Jackie to Van to the fire between them, their mouths hanging open.

“What in the actual fuck are you guys doing?” Nat demanded.

17. another rehearsed motion

1994

"You should go home, Shauna," Jackie urged, "it's fine. I'm fine."

"Jax…" Shauna mumbled, sitting cross-legged on top of Jackie's purple duvet. Bare-faced, wide-eyed, hair still damp from the shower.

Jackie didn't want Shauna to go home. She wanted Shauna to pull the covers back. Wanted her to demand that Jackie join her, to wrap her up in the flannel she'd tossed aside, the one that always smelled like Shauna—like the pear glace body spray her aunt had given her for every birthday since they were thirteen and the vanilla lip balm that'd melted in the front pocket last year and… her skin. Her skin when she'd sweat just a little bit and God, that was gross, Jackie knew that was gross but she couldn't fucking help it because she wanted Shauna to be the only thing she could smell or see or hear.

Jackie wanted Shauna to force her into her arms and tell her everything was going to be okay.

Jackie wouldn't let her, though, if she tried. Shauna wouldn't try anyway. She'd protest a few more times, she'd pout, but ultimately she'd let Jackie shoo her out the front door.

"Jacqueline!" her mom yelled, voice carrying all the way from the other end of the hall.

She wasn't even supposed to be home tonight. She was supposed to be in Barcelona or Bermuda or… somewhere warm that started with a B, Jackie couldn't remember. But when Jackie and Shauna got back to the house, they'd heard her fumbling around. Jackie's dad must've left without her. They must've fought while Jackie was out.

Asshole.

"Jax," Shauna repeated. She moved in front of Jackie, touched her arm. Jackie jerked away.

She used to be able to hide this from Shauna, to make excuses for her mom. Say she was just sick or clumsy. They used to be kids. Her mom used to stick to one drug at a time. Used to wash it down with wine instead of liquor. Things were different then.

Jackie plastered a smile on her face.

"Seriously, you don't need to be here for the dramatics, you can come back over in the morning when she's sleeping it off."

Shauna frowned, but slowly started packing her things up. She was giving Jackie time to change her mind. They'd been talking in circles for ten minutes, Shauna knew she wasn't winning the argument.

"Why don't you just come stay at mine?" she asked one more time, shrugging her flannel on. Jackie's stomach dropped—she'd been hoping Shauna would forget it.

“Jacqueline!” Another shout, a hiccup so loud they could hear it from behind the closed door.

“You know I can’t leave her like this.” Jackie opened her bedroom door and pushed Shauna through it. “And you get grumpy when you don’t get your beauty sleep, so just go home and crash,” they were halfway down the stairs, Jackie riding Shauna’s heels, forcing her to pick up the pace, “and it’ll be morning before we know it and we can go to that new—”

Bang.

Her parent’s bedroom door slamming shut.

“Are you deaf or stupid, Jackie? What’s the excuse tonight?”

“Just a minute, mom!” Jackie called, keeping her tone pleasant. Not giving an inch. Offering nothing that could be perceived as attitude.

Jackie swung the front door open and shivered as the cold air rushed in. Shauna was still as a statue, eyes locked on Jackie’s.

“It’s okay,” Jackie promised. “Really, it—”

“I don’t know how,” her mom yelled, “I managed to raise such a spoiled—” a thud, her mom falling sideways against the wall, “fucking—” heavy footsteps growing closer, halfway to the staircase now, “brat.”

The sound of glass shattering hard, not like something dropped, not even like something thrown. Glass bursting apart—a bottle smashed against a hard surface.

Jackie jumped. This was new. This was something different. Her mom was too angry, she’d escalated too quickly. Jackie’s heart raced, her throat felt tight. The front door closed quietly, the lock clicked. Shauna was still in front of her. Jackie looked down, realized she’d grabbed Shauna’s sleeve without thinking, her fingers squeezing tight around the dark fabric. Holding her there.

“It’s okay,” Shauna said, dropping her backpack at their feet and pulling Jackie into a hug, “I’m not going anywhere, Jax.”

PRESENT

Jackie chased Natalie and Misty as they jogged back to the house, Van following close behind her. Nat hadn’t given them a chance to answer her question, she’d just stomped off, shaking her head and muttering under her breath.

Misty had seemed excited, smiling knowingly at them once it clicked for her. Jackie had no idea what exactly she’d decided they were up to, but she seemed to have come up with an explanation she found thrilling.

Van was grimacing—she’d started an explanation for Nat, but the second Nat turned on her heel Van seemed to accept that nothing she could say was going to halt this. Jackie was still calling Natalie’s name as she slammed the back door open and kicked her boots off.

“Hey!” Shauna whisper-yelled, walking towards them briskly. “Tai’s asleep, you can’t be stomping around in here, for fuck’s sake.”

She’d been sitting at the kitchen island, sipping on a glass of red wine, when Nat launched herself into the house. They all tumbled in, Van shutting and locking the door carefully behind them and immediately glancing at Tai. She was curled up, facing the back of the sofa, her hands tucked under her head. Still asleep.

“Natalie,” Van said calmly, “think before you speak.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be—” Nat was quiet, eyeing Tai, but not quiet enough for Shauna.

“Shut up,” Shauna warned. “All of you. Get away from the living room, you’ll wake her up!”

Jackie was nauseous. Her breaths were speeding up and her chest felt heavy. She’d been stupid, thinking the others wouldn’t notice. Shauna couldn’t stand being away from her for five minutes, let alone twenty-five. She’d probably sent Nat and Misty after them.

She couldn’t begin to imagine how Shauna was going to react, though, because suddenly she was pulling Jackie closer by her hip, leading her away from the door and into the back corner of the kitchen, furthest from where Tai was laying.

Shauna gave her a once over before waving the others over to them impatiently. As everyone followed suit, Shauna pulled her black, heavy-knit sweater over her head. It mussed her hair up, Jackie smoothing a hand over the back of her head without any thought, and left her in a ruby red, long sleeve v-neck. Shauna held the sweater out to Jackie.

“Put it on. Please.”

The sweater fell to the tops of her thighs, still warm with Shauna’s body heat. She snuggled into Shauna’s side. She had a sinking feeling in her stomach, a nagging fear that Shauna would be done with her for this. That this was a line she couldn’t cross, even though it wasn’t like what had happened out there. Shauna might not see that, and how the fuck was Jackie supposed to explain this to her when she barely understood it herself? Shauna wrapped both arms around Jackie and held her close.

“Hey, hey,” she whispered, “what’s wro—”

Nat arrived in front of them, grabbing Shauna’s shoulder, demanding her attention. Jackie pressed her face into Shauna’s neck—burying her head in the sand—and slipped her arms around her waist. It wasn’t what she’d planned on, in the two minutes she had to actually formulate a plan between then and now, but she was wrapped in Shauna’s sweater and between Shauna’s arms and her nose was in the crook of her neck and she smelled like cinnamon and maybe if Jackie was just sweet enough and touchy enough, this would all blow over. It honestly seemed like the best option she had.

“Jackie,” Natalie snapped, “are you for real with this shit?”

“Nat, what did you do?” Shauna asked quickly.

“What did I do? Jesus fucking Christ, you bitches are—”

“Nat didn’t do anything.”

Jackie turned her head towards Van's dejected voice. She was standing, still in her jacket, with her arms crossed against her chest. She tapped a foot impatiently, sneaking furtive glances at Taissa.

"That's not winning you any fucking brownie points, Palmer," Nat shook her head and sighed, her entire chest moving with it.

"Honey," Jackie said quietly, pulling back to give Shauna her best doe-eyed pout, "I need you to stay calm, okay?"

Shauna frowned at her, looking concerned more than anything, but squeezed her closer.

"Someone tell me what the fuck is going on!" Shauna demanded, looking from to Nat to Van to Misty, who pushed her glasses up and took a half-step forward.

"It appears," Misty offered calmly, voice low and soft, "that Van and Jackie were doing some sort of… protection rituals on the house. Nothing crazy."

Shauna flinched. It was brief, but Jackie felt it in her bones. Shauna's arms made to fly off of Jackie, allowing for space between them that hadn't been there before—Shauna caught it, readjusting, gripping Jackie tighter, in less than a second, but it made her stomach lurch.

Shauna took a shuddering inhale. Jackie felt the vibrations in her chest. She watched Shauna's eyes flutter closed. As she let the shaky breath out, Nat spoke.

"It was fucking witch shit, Shauna," Nat said, drawing her name out in annoyance. She waited a beat, but when no one responded she opened her mouth again, eyes wide in disbelief. "Creepy, fucking witch—"

Van and Shauna interrupted at the same time.

"Keep your voice down—"

"Shhh, I heard you the first time—"

Jackie pulled away from Shauna, gripping the hem of her sleeve between her fingers the way they did when they were young. When she didn't want to lose her in a crowd, when she was begging her to stay the night, when she was scared.

Don't leave me.

"Someone quietly," Shauna pried Jackie's fingers off her sleeve, taking her hand instead, "tell me what exactly is going on."

"They were scattering some water, moon water, I bet," Misty replied, raising a brow at Van who begrudgingly nodded once. "And burning some plants. Very basic, household witchcraft."

Nat's eyes were wider than Jackie had even seen them. She was staring between Shauna and Misty, completely ignoring Van and Jackie.

"And that's it?" Shauna clarified, gaze flitting between all of them. "Misty's right about what… you were doing?"

"Actually, yeah," Van mumbled, eyeing Tai again. "That's it."

“Oh my god,” Nat murmured, turning to pour herself a glass of wine, “you’re all the same. All of you.”

“It’s really like… normal stuff,” Jackie tried, chewing her lip and batting her lashes at Shauna, “like, I know when we do stuff it seems… concerning. But this shit is fairly normal, lots of people do it. It’s just like… it can’t hurt, right?”

Shauna took a deep breath. Jackie held hers, her chest tight.

“Just plants?” Shauna asked, eyes locked directly on Jackie.

“Just plants,” Jackie nodded.

“For like… protection? Nothing… nothing against other people, or whatever?”

Shauna sounded unsure, the words coming out rough and forced. She was brushing her hair off her face every few seconds, her hurried hand batting at it the only sign of frustration in her body.

“Yes.”

It was basically just for protection. One could argue that using the water charged by the Scorpio moon was a little offensive, the thorns a little harsh, but Jackie didn’t feel like she was lying when she calmed Shauna’s nerves. It was nothing like Shauna was imagining when she asked the question.

“And no… nothing…” Shauna shook her head like she was clearing it, “no blood or… or animals or anything like that?”

Jackie and Van answered in tandem.

“Baby, of course not—”

“Absolutely not—”

“Okay,” Shauna gulped. “Then we don’t worry about this right now. And no one tells Taissa about this. I mean it.”

“Agreed,” Van said softly. She was picking at her cuticles, edging closer to the living room slowly.

“Sorry, what?” Nat gaped at Shauna, leaning against the counter and gripping the stem of her full wine glass between tense fingers. “I’m all for not telling Tai, we don’t need her freaking out right now. But your woman is… is out there doing fucked up witch shit, and you wanna just ignore it because she… makes eyes at you and—and puts her grabby little hands on you?”

“Natalie, it isn’t—” Jackie started, stepping forward.

Shauna dropped Jackie’s hand in favor of blocking her with an outstretched arm across her body, palm resting against her hip.

“Nat, I’ve heard your concerns,” Shauna whispered roughly. “I will talk to my girlfriend in our room in private about whatever fucked up shit you think is going on and let you know if you get to have an opinion on it later—”

“But—”

“But right now it’s time for dinner and I need you to fucking drop it before Taissa hears you.”

“Un-fucking-believable,” Nat mumbled, before throwing back a long sip.

Girlfriend. Jackie’s mind was buzzing with fear and uncertainty, but she still clocked that. Shauna saying my girlfriend, just like that. So casual. Shauna swinging an arm in front of her, holding her back, separating her from an angry Natalie. Pressing a hand into her hip to keep her in place. Claiming her, calling Jackie hers. Wearing that low-cut, deep red shirt. There’d always been something about Shauna in red. Shauna angry. Shauna possessive.

Jackie cleared her throat. Van raised an eyebrow at her. Jackie could read that look from a mile away. You gonna let her talk for you like that? She ignored it.

“Is dinner ready, baby?” she asked Shauna. “I can set the table.”

“I can help,” Misty offered brightly.

“Thanks, Misty,” Jackie said, forcing a smile. “Nat, wanna go wake Lot?”

“It’s not really at the top of my wishlist, but yeah. Sure thing, Jackie.”

Nat set her wine down with a loud clink. Shauna and Van glared at her and she held her hands up.

“Sorry, sorry,” she whispered, backing away from them.

Jackie started pulling silverware out of the drawer quietly, handing it off to Misty.

“Let’s wait to wake Tai up until everything’s ready,” Shauna instructed, pulling the oven open and sliding a tray of bread out. “She needs all the sleep she can get.”

“Yeah she does,” Van snapped. “So tell me, why the fuck would we wake her up?”

Oh fuck. Oh fuck, fuck, fuck.

Shauna set the pan on the stovetop and slowly slipped the bright yellow oven mitt from her hand, the one Jackie had picked out years ago when they realized they’d occasionally be forced to actually use the oven here. She carefully placed it next to the dish rag on the counter, turning to face Van, a hint of a smile on her face.

Van’s look was stony, lips in a tight line, as she stepped toward Shauna. Jackie handed Misty the last of the silverware to free up her hands and stepped closer, so that each of them were only an arm’s distance from her. Nat picked her wine back up and took another half step backward, meeting Jackie’s eyes from the other side of the pair and making an oh, shit face at her.

“She hasn’t slept in days,” Shauna whispered angrily, “she’s in serious danger of sleepwalking right now.”

“Exactly, so again, why the hell would we wake her up?”

Van was nearing her limit. If Shauna pushed one more time this was going to go somewhere Jackie couldn’t bring it back from. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

She couldn't keep up, couldn't figure out how to make it out of this with both of them unscathed.

"Van," Shauna straightened up to her full height, "Tai needs food. She hasn't eaten anything but two fucking bites of mozzarella in the car earlier. If she doesn't eat, she will sleepwalk."

"She needs sleep," Van fired back. "I can watch her in case she sleepwalks and when she wakes up I can get her something to eat."

Shauna shook her head, dismissing Van like she was an annoying child.

"We're already in an unfamiliar place. If she sleeps in a weird position," Shauna drew the words out, condescendingly slow, "she will sleepwalk. We have to wake her up anyway, she might as well eat. I don't know if you remember, but she gets bad. We wanna avoid it, not provoke it. It's not as simple as just waking her up and offering her some leftovers."

Van took a moment, tilting her head to the side to crack her neck. Jackie heard the faint pop, watched her chest rise and fall with a deep breath before she spoke.

"I know her, Shauna. I'm not a fucking idiot, so you don't need to talk to me like I am. I can carry her to bed if that's what you're worried about. I'm pretty sure she'd sleep through it. I'm also pretty sure not every fucking decision is yours to make."

The last traces of Shauna's faint smile were gone, her narrowed eyes and set jaw an exercise in if looks could kill. She leaned back against the counter and crossed her arms. Jackie gripped her bicep, but she knew there was no slowing what was coming.

"I think… if you knew her so fucking well," Shauna spat, a whisper that was so clearly meant to be a yell, "if you'd actually been there for the worst of it, you'd know that I'm right about this and you're dead fucking wrong. And frankly, I'm sick of arguing with you."

Van smiled and Jackie's stomach sank. The last thing Jackie wanted to see right now was Van sporting a sardonic grin. Her teeth on full display, the harsh lines of her scars curving as her cheek rounded. She looked at Jackie, brows lifted—I told you so—before fixing her gaze on Shauna and clapping a hand on her shoulder.

Shauna's eye twitched as Van's fingers dug into her, but she gave no other reaction. Jackie held her breath. Misty set the silverware down on the counter with a small clatter and Nat ditched the wine glass, hands ready at her sides.

"I think," Van said calmly, "one of us is projecting right now and it sure as fuck isn't me."

She patted Shauna's shoulder once before dropping her hand back to her side. Nat let out a long, slow breath through pursed lips.

"Oh, dear," Misty mumbled behind Jackie.

Jackie shifted in front of Shauna, facing her. She hadn't moved. Hadn't blinked. Jackie could feel the gears in her brain turning, feel her calculating what she could get away with right now. Jackie wanted to roll her eyes, tell them they were both very much projecting and engaging in an insane possessive pissing contest right now, fighting over Taissa like toddlers over a toy, but she couldn't. So she wracked her brain for something else, anything else, until she saw Shauna twitch, the beginning of a sidestep.

“I don’t wanna fucking do this, you guys,” Jackie pleaded, the words tumbling out of her mouth.

They were honest words, but they weren’t what she’d had in mind. She pitched forward, dropping her forehead against the side of Shauna’s neck. Shauna’s arms came up around her hips—thank God— but she could feel Van’s eyes on the back of her head. She knew Shauna hadn’t locked off either, her head statue still and turned towards Van.

Jackie knew what Van was doing and as endlessly frustrating as it was, she knew it came from a good place. The way Jackie was letting Shauna act around her… it worried Van. Jackie could see that. But it was Shauna… Shauna here and loving Jackie and Van just needed to see they were both trying to protect her. Just like they were both trying to protect Tai.

Van scoffed—barely audible, almost passable as a cough—but Jackie knew she was meant to hear it. She couldn’t make herself turn around, her face buried in Shauna’s neck again, her nose hovering over skin warm and sweet, her forehead pressed against skin bruised purple from her own teeth. Shauna’s lips found her temple, her hand rubbed circles on her lower back.

“Listen,” Nat tried, “Van… she did only eat like… a bite of a sandwich. She isn’t great about eating, you know that.”

Nat’s words were cautious. Unlike Shauna, her tone was earnest, affirming Van’s connection with Tai. They were connected, just like Jackie and Shauna. Jackie knew that but… even she and Tai had stumbled, each tripping over the reintroduction of the other woman, sitting in that hotel room, trading snarky remarks and pushy advice. It was hard and Van and Shauna were… they had issues that ran deeper than just this.

“No, I know,” Van sighed. She was listening to Nat, hearing her out. Shauna tensed against Jackie.

“And I don’t know much about sleepwalking,” Nat pressed on, “but it seemed like it was worse when we didn’t have any food out there.”

“I for one don’t want to find her outside eating dirt from the garden beds later tonight,” Misty joked. ‘Who knows what spells,’ she wiggled her fingers dramatically, “these guys have cast on it?”

Everyone turned to stare at her, even Jackie twisting to take in her amused expression.

“Jesus, Misty,” Nat groaned. “Van, why don’t we just see if she wants something, huh?”

“I just think we can give her food when she wakes up, I don’t see why we need to force her up when she’s this exhausted.”

Nat and Van kept murmuring, but Jackie’s attention was drawn to Shauna’s voice in her ear.

“Babe, why don’t you go set the table?” she asked, dropping another kiss to Jackie’s hairline and squeezing her waist one final time before releasing her.

Jackie frowned at Shauna, with absolutely no intention of setting the goddamn table. Shauna nudged her hip and Jackie begrudgingly dropped the hold she had on the material at

the waist of her shirt. Shauna sidestepped her and made an immediate beeline for the living room, speed-walking directly toward Tai.

Oh shit, oh fuck.

Jackie followed, Van slipping ahead of her, just a pace behind Shauna.

“Oh, you fucking asshole,” Van muttered under her breath.

Jackie hovered at the back of the couch once she reached it, Shauna and Van walking around either side to get to Tai. Nat lingered halfway between them and Misty, who was still in the kitchen, tearing into a slice of garlic bread as she watched.

There was an extra blanket around Tai’s shoulders, Jackie’s favorite plush throw—the one she bundled up in on the coldest winter nights. Shauna must’ve laid it across her, tucked it tight to cradle her torso. Her forehead was pressed against the blue velvet of the couch, her chin drawn into her chest, and her knees were curled up in front of her stomach.

She looked young like this, her face fully relaxed with deep sleep—the first time Jackie had seen her without tension in her jaw or her cheeks in twenty-five years. Jackie felt an urge to touch her, to brush a hand over her hair or across her cheek, but Tai would hate that, so she slipped her thumbs in her pockets instead, keeping her distance.

“If anyone says anything about anything,” Shauna whispered, giving them one final warning as she leaned over Taissa, “I will personally make your life hell.”

Misty made a zipping motion across her lips, tossing the imaginary key aside. Nat rolled her eyes.

“Shauna, wait,” Van begged, falling in at her side.

Shauna ignored her, her hand landing on Tai’s shoulder and shaking gently.

“Taissa,” she said, voice still soft, but much louder than she’d allowed any of them to use since they’d come back inside.

She didn’t stir. Before Van could argue again, Shauna spoke more firmly.

“Taissa, wake up.”

A practiced tone, apologetic but urgent. One meant to rouse Tai immediately without sending her into a full panic. It was almost familiar to Jackie—Shauna’s voice pitched slightly higher, closer to teenage her than present her. Jackie’s breath hitched, she let her eyes stay shut a beat longer than a blink, tried to imagine the girl she heard in those words.

It didn’t materialize. They weren’t for her, weren’t part of a memory she could dig up. That tone, those words… they were for Tai.

Shauna was crouched beside her, hand still resting on her shoulder. Her eyes were soft—softer than they usually were.

Three simple words, and Shauna had Tai awake. Groggy, sure. Confused, absolutely. But awake, instantly.

Tai sat up, a rehearsed motion. The way women often jump to attention, pulling themselves out of a deep sleep, ready to take on the responsibilities waiting for them. The way Taissa always did, even when she was a kid. In the cabin, less sleep deprived than she was now, standing quickly when Akilah had a nightmare Mari couldn't soothe her out of. Practically slamming herself down the ladder when Van called out in pain, her fresh wounds weeping with infection and her skin dry and hot from fever. Jackie could see those moments perfectly. She could imagine, too, all the moments she missed. Tai waking to a screaming Shauna, pulling her close. Leaping up at the sound of shattering glass, dragging Shauna out of the wreckage.

Jackie swallowed, walking around the couch to get a better look at her, fighting the renewed urge to touch her. Taissa was holding both arms out in front of her as she bent forward, searching for something that wasn't there. Another rehearsed motion—a mother reaching for her child. Her son, Sammy—that much Jackie knew. Still young. Six? Maybe seven. A good age. A sweet age.

"M'up," Tai mumbled, swaying slightly. "I'm up."

She forced her eyes open wider after every blink, trying to focus on Shauna. Van slipped in beside her, filling the space she'd left open, and threw an arm around her shoulders. Her hand knocked into Shauna's and Shauna retreated—stood up straight, stumbled back, fussed with the hem of her shirt as she watched them carefully.

"It's okay," Van said softly, pulling Tai close.

She pressed her nose to Tai's hair, a kiss to her forehead. Van's eyes were shut. She looked pained. Jackie could see a flash of it in her expression—physical pain, like waking Tai was actually injuring her. But Van's face relaxed in an instant, her jaw going slack in relief as Tai's body went slack against hers.

Two simple words, and Van had Tai lulled back to sleep. Tai's cheek was pressed to Van's chest, her mouth slightly open, her whole stomach rising and falling gently with deep breaths. Van twisted, enveloping her entire body in her arms and resting her chin on the crown of her head. Tucking her in.

The blanket had slipped as Tai moved, halfway off her upper back. Jackie reached out and adjusted it, securing it around her shoulders. Shauna sighed so heavily it snapped Jackie's gaze to her. She looked heartbroken, close to tears. Jackie reached for her wordlessly.

Shauna didn't come to her. She turned, tried to walk out of the room. Jackie made chase, caught her by her wrist and tugged. Firmly, rougher than she'd usually be. She couldn't leave Van and Tai right now, and she sure as hell couldn't have Shauna walking away from her. Everyone needed to stay put.

Shauna whipped around, eyes wide in what Jackie was certain the others would read as anger. Everyone but Tai, that is. Tai would know what Jackie knew—that this was fear, that Shauna's frustration and her impatience were born out of anxiety, not aggression. But Tai was asleep. Van was keeping her that way with practiced touches—a hand tucked under her sweater to brush over her bare skin, the same slow, sure movements Shauna made when she wanted to soothe Jackie.

Tai wasn't awake to back Jackie up. She couldn't help convince the others that Shauna was coming from a place of love, that she was just as scared and exhausted and worried as the rest of them. Jackie needed Shauna to let everyone else see that.

So Jackie forced Shauna into her arms, dragging her in how she had that first night they'd all spent together, when she'd led her to the bathroom and drawn her close so quickly they'd collided more than embraced. Shauna still had a bruise on her back, just above her left hip, where the doorknob had dug into her. Jackie had run her fingers over it a few hours ago and, when Shauna told her it was from that night, Jackie had run her lips over it for good measure.

She placed a hand over that spot now.

"Go set everything up, love," she whispered into her neck. "I've got this."

Shauna sighed heavily, her body going slack in Jackie's arms. Like Taissa had against Van's chest, only moments before.

"You know I'm just—" Shauna choked, her voice barely a murmur. "I'm just trying to—oh, damn it—"

Look after her, Jackie filled in the words for her. Do what's best for her. Take care of her.

"I know," Jackie kissed her jaw, just beneath her earlobe. She let her lips linger there—Shauna's skin had always been so silky, like the clothes they'd dressed their dolls in. A memory Jackie could reproduce right now—Jackie and Shauna making their Barbies change clothing, embody different eras. The two of them at eight years old, with Lottie always wanting to construct elaborate doll funerals, a game Jackie hated. Why can't they just be happy? Shauna may have liked doll fights, but they always ended in kisses. Plastic heads stuck together, immobilized arms stretched frozen around one another.

Shauna felt that way now, shifting into plastic, straightening up her shoulders. Forcing herself into a frame. Defensive, offensive, rotating positions on the field. Shauna had always been a master at the game. It was the after that she couldn't handle.

"Fine," Shauna sighed loudly. She dropped her hands from Jackie's waist and walked back towards the kitchen. Jackie turned around as she passed the couch strategically, looking anywhere but at Van and Taissa.

Fuck me. Jackie watched Van's hand move subtly across the bottom of Taissa's spine, her eyes planted firmly on the top of Tai's head. Jackie looked up at Shauna's back against the white cabinets, her hands half-slamming plates on the counter, pushing Misty out of the way. She met Natalie's eyes, her gaze of what the fuck.

She inhaled.

"Okay," Jackie announced, throwing on her captain's voice, the voice she used for her mother, for messy authors on long phone calls that needed to end. Okay, okay. "Shauna says dinner in five. Nat, why don't you go wake Lot?"

Natalie raised her eyebrows. "Yeah," she said slowly, tilting her head towards the staircase.

Natalie, always tracking their safety, constantly aware. She offered biting remarks, slung insults at them, but she, more than any of the rest of them, would never leave anyone behind. Even now, even when the threat was a glorified domestic squabble, rather than a pack of

wolves or a pack of cultists, Natalie was doing one final assessment before leaving the room. *You sure you know what you're doing, Taylor?*

Jackie jerked her chin down, quick. Nat blinked in recognition, nodding. "Sure."

"And Misty," Jackie said, taking steps forward towards the couch. "Help Shauna put the plates together, yeah? So when Lottie and Taissa are awake—" Van's chin jerked up. Jackie ignored her, for just another second, her knees nearly touching the edge of the couch. "Everything will be set and we can just eat, yeah?"

Misty smiled and gave a little salute. "You got it, Jackie-Oh!" She turned to Shauna, holding out a plate for serving.

"Jack," Van murmured.

Jackie looked down. Van was staring at her with those eyes, the ones that always made Jackie dissolve. Earnest, sensitive, blue and green and pleading.

It didn't help that Tai's soft curls were tucked under them, obscuring the rest of her face—the pouted lips and faint frown lines at the corners of them that Jackie was filling in mentally to finish this image of Van, broken and begging.

"We'll let her sleep for a few more minutes," Jackie whispered, trying to keep her voice neutral, not condescending.

"She's so tired, Jack—"

"I know," Jackie stroked a flyaway strand away from Van's cheek, beneath her left eye. The one that was half-blind. "I know, angel. But this way, you know, she'll get some food in her. And then you can take her to bed as soon as she's done."

Van grimaced, squeezing her eyes shut. Frustrated, but relenting.

Jackie knew the gesture too well. She didn't like where she knew it from.

"I'm gonna go help them set up, okay?" Jackie continued, thumbing Van's temple. "So I stop disturbing her rest. Yeah?"

Van nodded, sighing into Taissa's hair. Jackie spared a final glance at Taissa's lips, open just barely, full and youthful, the same as the day Jackie met her, fresh from Princeton, her willowy frame sharp across the practice field—stunningly, unbelievably pretty.

By the time Nat came down with Lottie—hair in one long braid tossed in front of her shoulder, dressed in white silk pajamas and a colorful pashmina draped around her shoulders, the one Jackie knew she kept on the armchair next to her bed—the table was set. Shauna and Misty were placing the last of the serving platters on the table when they came in, Lottie stretching her arms above her head and yawning. Jackie couldn't remember a time they'd actually used all these dishes, but Shauna had provided. Bread, salad, pasta, plates of veggies, fruit washed and peeled, pitchers of water and tea, bottles of wine—the whole room smelling of the apple crisp still in the oven.

"Lottie," Jackie was quiet, though she'd realized that with Tai completely passed out in Van's arms they probably had no need for the hushed tones they'd adopted, "Van and I were out doing the… chores, and—"

“Chores?” Nat scoffed.

Lottie was peering at one of the bottles of wine, turning it in her hand and squinting at the label. She pulled her reading glasses out of her breast pocket and read aloud.

“Apothic red blend. What the hell is this?”

She shoved her blue frames on top of her head, and looked at Jackie questioningly. Before Jackie could direct her away from the nine-dollar bottle and back to the actual task at hand, Misty flipped the overhead light on. Jackie flinched and shut one eye as the room flooded with bright white light.

“God,” Lottie groaned, “turn that shit off.” She waved up towards the light as she walked over to the large lamp in the corner of the room, stepping on the foot pedal that ignited its yellow glow.

“Sorry?” Misty asked, vaguely affronted, mostly confused. “I thought you needed more light to see.”

“We never use that light,” Jackie explained, “just the sconces and the lamp. It’s so… I dunno, jarring, to have the big light on.”

Lottie pulled out her chair at the head of the table farthest from the door, and sunk down, resting her chin in her hand. She was still waking up. She might not wake fully, but that was fine. Jackie just wanted to get some food in her before she slept this… mood off.

“I heard, Jackie,” Lottie said abruptly, punctuated by another yawn. “They saw you, they think we’re witches, Misty’s excited, Shauna doesn’t seem to give a fuck, we don’t tell Tai. Got the memo. Can someone run down to the cellar and get some real wine?”

“Oh, I love wine pairings, I can go,” Misty volunteered, completely taking the focus off of Lottie’s summary of the evening’s events. Jackie’s shoulders dropped, tension lifting. “I actually took this class in 2014, right before I went to Spain, on—”

“It’s the first door on the left at the foot of the stairs,” Lottie interrupted. “Pair whatever you want.”

“Wine cellar, huh?” Nat asked, as Misty headed off. “This place really is something else.”

“Mmm, there’s a whole living room down there. A bedroom and bathroom too, if you feel like you need to be closer to the booze tonight,” Lottie joked, kicking the chair to her left out and motioning for Nat to sit.

Jackie turned to Shauna, who was hovering at the other end of the table, worrying her sleeve with nervous fingers. She’d been remarkably silent. It shot fear through Jackie—made her envision Shauna with blown pupils, loose limbs, no ability to communicate. Jackie pulled out a chair, the other head of the table.

“Sit, baby,” she instructed.

“I need to—”

“No, you don’t need to do anything. I’m going. Right now, okay?”

Shauna nodded, sat carefully and blinked up at Jackie, like she wanted to add something but couldn't find the words—the same look she'd given her in bed last night after the episode. Jackie glanced at Nat and Lottie, huddled close and engrossed in conversation, before turning back to Shauna. She perched both hands on Shauna's knees and bent forward to kiss her quickly. Shauna shut her eyes, gripping Jackie's forearms, as Jackie whispered in her ear.

"Are you okay? Do you feel like you're gonna have an—"

"No," Shauna whispered back forcefully, "I'm not… I'm not going anywhere. If that's what you mean."

"Okay, then wait here." Jackie kissed her forehead, straightening up. "I'll be right back."

Tai and Van were exactly where she'd left them, Van's eyes remaining stubbornly shut until Jackie was crouched right in front of them, as if she could will her away by ignoring her presence.

"Hey love," Jackie sighed, rubbing her upper arm, "it's time."

"Jack, this feels so…" Van shut her eyes again, took a breath, reopened them, "dramatic, forcing her to get up like this. I get… I get that it might make it more likely, but how would she know for sure that—"

Van sounded bitter when she said she. Sounded like she wanted to spit the word at Shauna's feet. Jackie cut it off.

"She loves her. Shauna loves her. She loves Tai how you love me, and I know," Jackie raised her voice just slightly as Van started to open her mouth to argue, "that's hard to imagine. I know how she is. Trust me. But I think… if Shauna and Nat agree, I think we just need to listen."

"Yeah," Van mumbled reluctantly. Not real agreement. Acceptance.

Jackie swallowed back the sting of tears in her throat—it felt horrible, disappointing Van, disturbing Tai. Jackie knew Tai would reach out again, knew how deep the instinct to reach for your child ran, so she situated herself right in front of her, ready to be there to grab onto.

Jackie rubbed a firm hand back and forth over her knee.

"Tai, honey," she said loudly, "I need you to wake up now."

I need you to. Not Shauna, not Van. Take this off of them. Put this on me.

Tai stirred as she'd expected. Van kissed her temple before letting her arms loosen as Tai struggled to sit upright.

"I'm sorry, baby," she whispered into her hair. Jackie heard it, but she knew she wasn't meant to. She ignored the words, ignored Van's look of worry, ignored the ache in her own chest. She focused on gripping Tai's hands as she reached forward.

"Yeah, yes," Taissa groaned. "I'm up."

The same hard blinks as earlier. The urgent but ready tone, the determined body language. Tai took Jackie's hands, squeezing automatically, then she recognized her, confusion flashing in her eyes. Van reached for her again, a hand aiming for the small of her back, and Jackie

pulled her to her feet. She could not wake this woman up a third time if Van coaxed her back to sleep, she would simply have to lock Shauna in their room until morning.

Tai stood, a bit of a sway in her shoulders, and looked around the room. Her eyes found Van's and Van forced a small smile.

"What's—Must've dozed off. What're we—"

"Dinner time," Van answered, standing and wrapping an arm around her waist. "That's all. Just need to get some food in you before you go back to sleep."

She'd done a 180, tone and demeanor completely swapped out for something presentable, something Tai wouldn't question while she was still this groggy. Tai nodded, dazed, and leaned into Van a little. Jackie caught Van's thumb running over her hip and dropped her hands. She felt confident that Van wouldn't undo this, now that Tai was clearing her throat and putting one foot in front of the other.

Misty had returned, a variety of wines laid out in front of her, sitting beside Nat. Shauna was ignoring her completely, staring at them as they walked in. Nat was watching Misty, open-mouthed, slowly reaching for the bottle closest to her. Lottie was halfway back to sleep, chin now perched in both hands, lips smushed up in a little pout.

Van chose the seat on Lottie's other side, farthest from Shauna, Tai falling in after her, Jackie last. Shauna watched as Van pulled a chair out for Taissa—still a bit out of it, focused on the table in front of her—and Van returned the glare, slowly kissing Tai's temple, her eyes still locked on Shauna's. Shauna scoffed, turning her head down and to the side quickly and leaning back a few inches.

Tai was too busy trying to focus on what Misty was rattling off to notice, gauging whether it was something worth listening to, thank God, but Jackie sure as hell noticed. It was an intentional spite, a bullshit, territorial marking and Jackie hated it.

It was the same exact shit Shauna had pulled in the kitchen—slipping a hand under her sweater as she stared at Van—and Jackie was getting fucking sick of their immature nonsense, of them using her and Taissa as fucking… pawns in this stupid game they were playing. Jackie's sympathy was finally wearing thin.

She shot Van a true dirty look, one she hadn't used since they were dating—one of their few fights, sitting on the too-small balcony of their dyke friends' apartment, Van making a passive-aggressive, unfunny joke about how Jackie just couldn't keep her hands off of crazy brunettes.

Van's glare twisted into a stubborn, unwilling-to-be-phased expression, but she avoided Jackie's eyes as she took her own seat.

Dinner went fine, Jackie supposed. Nat, Lottie, and Misty tucked into Shauna's cooking—taking seconds, even complimenting her. But Shauna and Van remained tense—snapping at each other, making terse comments. Tai was bewildered, exhaustion still firmly present, watching their exchanges through heavy lashes. She hadn't eaten much at all, but she'd had plenty of wine, refilling her glass before she'd emptied it, losing track of how much she'd poured.

“Taissa,” Jackie said carefully, “maybe you should eat some more. I could heat the pasta up again, it’s gone a little cold but it was good warm.”

“I’m not hungry,” she shrugged, “I’m mostly wondering why everyone’s acting so fucking weird.”

Tai slid a bottle closer to herself, Chardonnay sloshing out the top when she picked it up at an odd angle. Nat stood suddenly, rounding the table and pulling it out of her hand mid pour.

“Hey,” Tai snapped, “I was in the middle of—”

“In the middle of getting drunk off your ass.” Nat walked back to her seat. “It’s enough, Tai. You need to eat some fucking food if you’re gonna drink like that.”

Nat slammed back into her chair and took a long sip straight out of the bottle.

“What the hell is with everyone monitoring my fucking food intake? I’m fine. Jackie’s barely touched her,” Tai surveyed her plate quickly, “anything, really.”

“And Jackie’s had a glass of wine, Taissa,” Shauna said, voice struggling to remain kind rather than judgmental, “not a bottle. I just think you need—”

Van peered around Tai and Jackie to get a clear view of Shauna as she spoke.

“You’ve got a lot of fucking thoughts, Shauna. We get it.”

“Okay Palmer, you seriously need to learn when to shut your fucking mou—”

“Hey!” Lottie yelled. “Both of you need to learn to shut your fucking mouths.”

Shauna and Van in tandem—

“Don’t you start—”

“Lot, stay out—”

Then Tai and Jackie—

“What happened with you two?”

“I’m beyond done with this shit!”

Jackie scooted her chair away from Shauna, closer to Tai, and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. Tai looked down at her, a little stunned.

“Okay,” Natalie said forcefully, “why don’t we have dessert instead of… whatever the fuck this is?”

“I’ll get it,” Misty offered, jumping to her feet. “I have something else I want to show you guys, anyway!”

Jackie didn’t stop to wonder what Misty was going to subject them to upon her return, what fresh hell her idea of show and tell might bring. She knocked her head against Tai’s, resting it there as Tai hesitantly patted her leg.

“Jackie, are you okay?” she asked quietly.

“I’ve been better. When they aren’t acting like fucking idiots, y’know?”

Jackie gestured between Shauna and Van. She slid her hand to the middle of Taissa's back, between her shoulder blades. Tai's muscles relaxed just a bit under her fingers when she rubbed small circles. Exhausted. She's exhausted.

"Amen to that," Tai muttered, side-eyeing both of them. Shauna and Van seemed to have gained the wherewithal to stay quiet right now, at the very least, both offering nothing but little sighs or tapping feet.

"You're right," Jackie added, drawing Tai's attention back to her. "I do need to eat more. We both do. I—Well, I hate eating alone. It's a… thing for me. So… will you eat something with me?"

Tai seemed to read her like a book, immediately recognizing what Jackie was angling at, but she caved anyway, nodding silently and picking her fork up for what could only be the second or third time since they sat down for dinner.

Lottie and Nat cleared the table, taking everything but Jackie and Tai's full plates into the kitchen. Moments after they sat down, Misty scurried in. She came bearing no dessert, just a manilla envelope, held with both hands in front of her chest as if it was a diploma she was showing off. Her curls bounced as she plopped down in her seat, her eyes wide and her lips split into a grin.

"What the fuck is that?" Lottie asked, crossing her legs and tugging at a loose thread on her pashmina absentmindedly.

"Okay, I've been waiting for the right moment to show you guys these, and Nat mentioned she wanted to talk about this tonight, so…"

Misty flipped the envelope open with careful fingers, reaching all the way to the bottom. It felt performative—a magician looking for the rabbit in a tophat.

"Nat wanted to talk about what?" Van demanded, sitting up taller and shooting Nat a pointed look. Shauna cleared her throat aggressively.

Jackie's heart dropped. She prayed this wasn't an ambush, wasn't Natalie having a sudden change of heart and looping Tai in on the thing they swore they wouldn't—

But Jackie lost that train of thought, panic melting down into confusion, because suddenly Misty was at her reveal, drawing her hand back out, holding… a card? No, multiple cards? Bigger than playing cards, smaller than something you'd get at Hallmark.

"Absolutely not, Misty!" Van roared. "Put that shit away right fucking now."

Van's danger voice. Her final warning, the one she gave when she meant business.

Jackie squinted and pitched forward to make out the design on the card at the bottom of the stack, but Misty's hand kept moving, blurring the image. It looked like… it was a… a tarot card? An illustration of a pregnant woman, her bump visible in side profile, surrounded by flowers in bloom. The empress.

Why is Van flipping shit over a goddamn tarot card?

"Jesus, Misty, I didn't ask for visual aides," Nat remarked, ignoring Van completely. "You've kept those this whole fucking time?"

“Kept what?” Jackie looked between the two of them, flicked back to Van’s blanching face.

“Oh, of course I did! I love a good memor—”

“This is not happening. Put… them… away.”

Van was leaning so far over the table she looked like she might start rising above it. Her jaw was clenched, her breathing quick. Jackie could hear her breaths from where she sat on the other side of Tai.

Tai’s weary expression soured, something akin to annoyance creeping in. Lottie, unphased as ever, poured herself some tea. And Shauna… Shauna looked scared. Not quite as terrified as Van, but steadily approaching it.

“What the fuck is—” Jackie tried again, cut off promptly by Natalie’s response to Van’s demands.

“I thought you wanted us to be more honest about everything.” She leaned forward, mirroring Van’s position. “I thought you wanted us to stop pretending. To stop acting like we didn’t do the shit we did.”

“Yeah, well—” Van sucked air through her teeth, eyes flicking up for half a second. Searching for an answer. “I changed my mind. Not this. Not like this.”

Misty was laying the cards out on the mahogany table, the muted hues standing out against the dark wood—mostly purples and golds.

“What are those even from? Van, why are you—”

This time it was Shauna who interrupted Jackie.

“They’re nothing. Old bullshit. Misty, just put them away.”

She was trying to sound nonchalant, adopting a forced casual expression, but Jackie could feel it radiating off of her. Fear. Shame.

What in the absolute fuck?

“Jackie doesn’t have the whole truth. Probably not even half of it, knowing you bitches,” Nat insisted, tapping a finger to the table harshly, just shy of one of the cards. Misty gave her a look—don’t interfere with my work, please. Jackie startled when she heard her name, bounced her knee, kept trying to gather clues from the other women’s reactions. “And it isn’t fucking fair. I’m not letting you keep her in the dark like this. She deserves to know.”

Nat seemed to be addressing three of them in particular—gaze landing on Lottie, Van, and Shauna in turn.

Misty finished laying out the cards. Seven of them, forming a makeshift diamond—one at the top, two beneath it, then three, and one again.

“Shauna,” Jackie pleaded, staring her down directly, “just tell me what they’re talking about.”

“Tai,” Shauna said instead, “what the hell are you doing?”

Tai was piling food on her fork, shoveling it down. Half her plate was clean. She swallowed quickly and dropped her fork with a clatter.

“I need more wine for this,” she answered, “and you idiots won’t let me drink if I don’t eat. So there, I ate. Pass it over.” She made a grabbing motion in Nat’s direction. Nat rolled her eyes and slid the bottle back to her reluctantly.

“This isn’t the right time for this,” Shauna said firmly.

“Let Misty tell her little story,” Lottie declared, rubbing her temple with two fingers, “and then we can all go to bed. Go ahead, Misty.”

Misty opened her mouth, smile still present, but slightly duller than the grin she’d walked in with.

Van and Shauna stood at the same time, their chairs scraping against the floor. Van actually reached across the table for the cards, Misty blocking them with hands tented in front of them, Lottie grabbing Van’s forearm to intercept. Like kids. Like little kids arguing over toys. Again.

“Lottie, you don’t need to be calling any shots right now,” Shauna argued, venom seeping in. “I can tell you’re drugged out of your fucking mind and based on how you behaved this morning, you weren’t working with many critical thinking skills to begin with.”

Jackie expected Van to defend Lottie, to turn on Shauna and tell her off. Not for Lottie’s sake, necessarily, but for her own. It was a perfect opportunity to escalate their stupid fucking feud.

Van didn’t take it.

“We’ve all had a long day. This isn’t helpful anyway, just stop with the—”

“Okay!” Jackie yelled, jumping to her feet. “Both of you, sit down and shut the fuck up!”

Shauna and Van agreeing—on the same side about this? About keeping something from her? There was no way she was going to let this go, no matter how much she wanted to drag Shauna back upstairs and pull the covers over their heads again. She had to know. Whatever this was, she couldn’t ignore it.

Shauna and Van both stared at her, mouths hanging slightly open. Neither of them spoke, neither of them moved.

“You idiots have been fighting all goddamn night,” Jackie pointed at each of them in turn, “and suddenly you’re on the same side? Because you don’t want me to know whatever the fuck Nat thinks I should know? Absolutely not. No, fuck that.”

She could see both of them thinking, trying to get out of this.

“Sit,” she ordered.

Shauna sank down first, Van followed shortly after.

“I’m gonna hear this right now, whether you want me to or not,” Jackie finished, taking her own seat and folding her shaking hands on the table in front of her. “Misty, go ahead.”

“Okay,” Misty agreed, using splayed hands to push all the cards to the center of the table without breaking their formation, ‘this is going to be a… hard topic for some of us, and after last night,’ she made a point to look at Shauna and Van, “we need to be looking out for each other.”

Nat shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Everyone watched as Jackie moved her chair, placing it next to Shauna’s at the head of the table. She positioned herself so that she could reach Shauna and have an unobstructed view of Van. Tai rested her forehead in one hand, gaze fixed on her plate in front of her, and reached blindly for Van with the other. Van took her hand and Tai brought them down onto her own lap.

Jackie rested a hand on Shauna’s thigh. Shauna made a pained expression at her touch, looking up and away from Jackie and swallowing audibly before meeting her eyes. Shauna shook her head slightly—an apology.

Jackie wanted to stop this. To prevent whatever pain was coming her way. To forget all about this, to drag Van over to the fireplace and talk until their eyes got heavy, to send her off to bed with Taissa, to pull Shauna into their own bed and tangle their limbs together until there was no more space between them. But what she wanted and what she needed were very different things.

Jackie took a quick, determined breath and nodded once.

“It was freezing, when we found these,” Misty started, tone almost wistful, “the end of winter, but bitterly cold. We didn’t know how close spring was. It seemed like the snow may never melt. We had no way of knowing that in just a few short weeks the sun—”

“Oh my god,” Nat groaned. “What’s with the theatrics, Misty? This isn’t Goosebumps, it’s our fucking lives. We don’t need the build-up, just cut to the chase.”

“I’m setting the scene,” Misty defended, bristling. “But fine, I get it. We’re all a bit snappy and tired. I’ll just have to go with the abridged version. It’s fine, I can adapt.”

“Abridged version? What, have you been rehearsing this?” Lottie inquired incredulously.

“Not rehearsed silly, but I’ve thought about it. Since we all got back together.”

Shauna groaned and Tai shook her head, finally looking up to raise a brow at Misty.

“Anyway,” Misty shimmied her shoulders a little, getting back into character, “it was cold. We were hungry. Jackie, you’d been gone for a while. Shauna had already given bir—”

Jackie and Tai both shot Misty icy glares. She put her hands up in surrender. Shauna’s hand covered Jackie’s and squeezed reassuringly.

“Shauna was back to normal. Well, not normal normal, obviously. But… the normal she had out there. She was talking and doing things again. One of the JV girls had brought a deck of tarot cards on the plane and a group of them were going to do a reading. Lottie thought they were being reckless. She tried to take them from Crystal—”

“God, she annoyed the shit out of me,” Lottie interrupted. “Always with the singing.”

“The dancing too,” Tai added, crossing her ankles and leaning towards Van, looking almost surprised she’d said the words out loud.

“I always kind of liked her,” Misty shrugged. “But that doesn’t matter. What matters is that in the commotion, the deck fell to the ground. By this point, everyone was on the main floor, gathered around the argument. As the deck crashed to the ground—”

“I’m sorry,” Shauna snapped, “but Misty, the editorializing. For fuck’s sake.”

Jackie was relieved to hear her speak, to know she was engaged, even if it was another needless interruption standing between her and the end of this fucking story.

“Okay, well I don’t see anyone else volunteering to—”

“I volunteer,” Nat sat forward, elbows on her knees, hands clasped in front of her. “For this part, at least. I can’t explain all the fucking… interpretation shit.”

“Fine,” Misty sniffed, shrugging one shoulder.

“The cards fell. Like Misty said, everyone was there. Only seven cards slid out of the deck, the rest stayed put. They moved in… weird directions, I’ll give you that much. It didn’t make sense, the fucking… physics of it.”

“Oh, you’re a physicist now?” Tai snorted, taking another small sip of her wine.

“Anyway,” Nat continued, ‘six out of the seven cards slid right at somebody. At all of us,’ she gestured to the table. “A card stopped at each of our feet. Fucking… spooky shit.”

“What do you mean stopped at your feet… like, how clearly are we talking?” Jackie asked.

“Clearly,” Nat and Lottie responded at the same time.

Jackie looked at Shauna. She chewed on her cheek, bobbed her head in agreement.

“So, we were assigned our roles,” Misty spoke loudly, taking charge of the narrative again. “That’s the heart of this. The thing we need to admit. Who we were out there. Who we really are.”

“Misty,” Van begged through gritted teeth, “just… fuck, just keep it to the point.”

“Okay, none of you seem to understand that the more you interrupt me, the longer this takes.” Misty crossed her arms and blinked quickly at them, her annoyance building as the seconds ticked past. “So, does anyone else have anything to add or can I keep going?”

“Keep going,” Jackie directed, staring fixedly at the cards.

“The high priestess.”

Misty lifted the card on top of the pyramid, held it up for everyone to see. Jackie knew tarot. Not deeply, not like some women did—the ones who got paid to do readings or made it their entire personality. She knew the basics, though. Could predict the woman depicted on it, her long flowing hair, her crown, her robe with its crescent moon. She could predict, too, who the card belonged to.

“Lottie,” Misty confirmed Jackie’s suspicion, gently placing it back on the table. Lottie grimaced—her first show of discomfort. “Divine knowledge. Intuition, subconscious thought, silence, secrets, withdrawal. The spiritual leader interpreting signs. Guiding everyone else. That role was easy to define. Lottie called the shots.”

Lottie took her glasses off her head, folded them carefully, and set them aside, before burying her face in her hands.

“Her right hand,” Misty lifted the first card in the second row, “the magician.”

Jackie stared at the card—the robed man, his wand raised high, the infinity symbol hanging overhead.

Van rolled her neck side to side. Tai held her forearm with her free hand, clinging to her, grounding her.

“Van. Manifestation. Protection drawn from symbols, resourcefulness, new beginnings, untapped talents. The connection between those of the physical world,” Misty glanced at Tai, ‘and those of the spiritual word.’ She tilted her head toward Lottie. “Another easy role to define. Lottie’s counsel. Her sounding board.”

“So…” Jackie said, unsure of where her words would take her, “you… this was like—Okay, you guys are telling me these roles, but I don’t get how this happened. I mean, I do. But is this a thing where it was like, oh weird, the cards sort of fit who we are? Or was this a thing where you thought… okay, this is… who we need to become?”

There was a moment of silence, the only sound the faint thudding of Jackie’s heel bouncing against the floor.

“Both, sort of,” Nat finally said. “Depends on who you ask, I guess. I know that isn’t a good fucking answer. But none of it is clear. Wasn’t then, isn’t now. This isn’t how I imagined us having this conversation… but I think… I do think Misty’s on track. This is a big… thing that happened. It set shit off.”

“Please, this was a game we played,” Tai corrected. “Don’t indulge this shit. We were kids, we found a spooky game, we pulled some cards, and we made up a story.”

“A game?” Nat shook her head, dumbfounded. “Tai, we killed people.”

“Not because of this!” Tai shot back.

“Oh yeah, for what then?” Nat challenged.

“I don’t…” Tai’s eyes were glassy, her brow furrowed. “We were… we were starving and—and high, we were high. There were the mushrooms and those other plants that we…”

Taissa tilted her head to the side, her mouth frozen in the position of the last syllable she’d uttered. She looked like she was waking up all over again, discovering herself in a position she didn’t expect to be in. Van tentatively shifted, slowly wrapping an arm around her waist. Tai closed her lips, rested her hand on Van’s knee.

“Wait, you—” Jackie rubbed her face, fingers pressing over her cheekbones, Shauna flinching when she pulled her hand away from her. “You killed people because of this?”

Again, no one offered an immediate response. Jackie met Shauna’s eyes. Her lips were pursed, she sniffed and turned her hand over, palm up between them. Jackie took it. They were both shaking—Shauna’s tremors larger jerking motions, Jackie’s a small, steady vibration.

“Yeah,” Shauna answered simply, “we did.”

Tai made a small noise, something between a cough and a gasp. Lottie’s face was still obscured behind her manicured fingers. Van looked pained again—raw and physical, like her cheek torn open, like her blood dripping on the bathroom tile, like her porcelain skin painted black and blue.

“Let’s just…” Nat mumbled, voice small. Higher, younger. “We should let Misty finish.”

Misty’s hand hovered over the next card—Jackie already knew who it belonged to. She slid her chair closer to Shauna’s, rocked to the side and pulled her close. Shauna melted into her.

“The empress.”

Misty showed the card off—a beautiful woman, her stomach round and low, a crown of peonies resting on deep brunette locks, an overripe pomegranate spilling seeds onto her lap. She held it in the air slightly longer than the other two, her lips quirking to the side. Thinking.

Misty returned it to the formation, found the words to continue.

“Shauna.” Shauna swallowed, her gulp loud in Jackie’s ear. ‘Motherhood,’ Jackie’s heart raced, “dominion over growing things, manipulation,” Shauna moved just slightly, Jackie buried fingers in her hair and held her in place, “creation and destruction of life.”

Jackie’s hands weren’t the only part of her shaking now, her chest moved unevenly, her arms trembled. Whatever this was, it was going to be hard to hear. This wasn’t a game. Jackie knew that. She knew Tai had altered it, softened the past to survive, the same way Jackie had.

The other side of Shauna—her Shauna, the one who gave gentle touches and gentle smiles—was something Jackie had always tried to sweeten in her mind. Anger rewritten as loyalty, cruelty cast as uncertainty, hateful too strong a word to use for a girl so sensitive.

But Jackie could handle it. She could handle anything for Shauna—sitting on the bed, her high wearing off, Shauna confessing to love, Shauna confessing to murder. She could handle it.

“The last clearly defined role,” Misty explained, pushing her glasses up as she squirmed in her chair, excitement lighting up her eyes. “Shauna had the final say in matters of taking life.”

“I—So—Wait… So, you guys… you k-killed people because of—Well, I guess I don’t even know the because of piece yet, but you…”

Jackie felt Shauna turn towards her, nose brushing her neck, mimicking Jackie’s earlier motions. Jackie tried again.

“Okay, you killed people for some reason and… and Shauna, you… you picked who to kill?”

Shauna shook her head against Jackie, chin digging into her shoulder, refusing to speak.

“Do we tell her now?” Misty asked, looking to Nat for confirmation. “The whole thing?”

Nat looked grim, but she gave the go-ahead.

“Yeah. We do. But don’t add any fucking anecdotes, Quigley. Short and… sweet.”

Shauna sat up suddenly, Jackie fearing she might leap out of her chair again to hurdle a threat or an insult in someone’s direction. She didn’t. She just let Jackie’s arm slide off of her and placed her hand in Jackie’s lap for her to take. Giving her space.

Fucking hell.

“One of the girls broke her arm a week or so after this whole thing. Slipped on a rock near the lake. She got a nasty infection—”

“Who?” Jackie asked.

“Oh,” Misty jumped, like the interruption had startled her this time. “Um…”

Misty wasn’t looking at Jackie, she was eyeing Shauna wearily.

“I don’t… think you wanna know, Jax. Really, I—” Shauna murmured.

“I wanna know,” Jackie insisted, leaving no room for argument.

“Michelle,” Nat supplied, meeting Jackie’s eyes. “It was Michelle.”

“Michelle,” Jackie nodded. She didn’t know her well, couldn’t even recall her last name. She remembered curly hair, long and dark. Kind eyes. “Okay, you can keep going.”

“There was no way she was going to make it,” Misty said, matter-of-fact. “I suggested that we be prepared to make her death worth something,”

Worth something. Make her death worth something. Jackie felt dizzy suddenly. She clutched the table in front of her with her free hand, knuckles going white.

“We were starving. Two girls were nearly dead, even nearer than the rest of us. They were out of time.”

Three, Jackie thought. Three, because she’d been close to death too that winter. Too weak to walk more than a few feet, too weak to pull a shirt over her own head, praying to every God she’d ever heard of, to every goddess she could dream up, that she would die from it.

“Lottie agreed. She said she knew what we needed to do. That if we killed her, before her natural death, the woods would provide. She asked Van first. The three of us agreed it would be a mercy killing anyway. She was miserable, we had nothing for pain at that point, we used everything on Van after the wolves and Shauna after the—after.”

Van tilted her head all the way back, skull thunking against the tall chair. Shauna bent forward at the waist, staring at the ground between her feet. Jackie tried to ignore them, tried to ignore everyone but Misty.

“Shauna gave the final clearance. That’s when Lottie actually interpreted the cards, that’s when everyone took their assigned roles. Lottie had a vision of plentiful game if we took her life, Van helped rationalize the decision, and Shauna gave the last go-ahead. Everyone agreed, regardless of the vision, that it was the practical thing to do. She was halfway to death and if we didn’t kill her ourselves before the infection spread, we had no way of knowing if she’d be safe to… eat.”

Eat.

To eat.

“Did—” Jackie looked at Van. Van, who’d always brought her meals to her. Van, who’d forced her to eat, nursed her back from the brink of death. “Did you bring me—Did I—Did I eat—”

Van didn’t answer clearly. Not like Misty and Nat had been as they steered this conversation. She didn’t have to answer clearly for Jackie to understand. Van pitched all the way forward, mumbled something unintelligible, and dropped her head between her knees.

Jackie lost her peripheral vision, edges going cloudy before it shifted to complete darkness. She brought her other hand up to the table, gripping it like an anchor, like it could keep her from spinning out. The thrum of her heart had already been in her ears, but now it was pressing in louder. She couldn’t hear anything else, just a flutter so quick it sounded constant, a hummingbird’s rhythm.

Her stomach was churning—red wine and a few bites of pasta and half a piece of bread, all sloshing around. Full. She felt overfull, like she was fit to burst. Suddenly there was a hand in front of her, Tai’s hand—nails painted a subtle pink, ring finger adorned with a simple band—in it an empty Bordeaux glass, wide-brimmed. Jackie couldn’t shake her tunnel vision. She couldn’t zoom out to see the rest of Tai, so she couldn’t figure out why she was shoving her glass in—

Oh.

Jackie vomited, somehow managing to snag the glass and hold it steady between two hands. Her throat burned. She cringed at the blood-red liquid splashing back at her when she retched again. Sobbing, now. Her chest heaving and her stomach clenching until it was empty.

When it was over, she set the glass in front of her and stood. She felt two hands slide off of her, Tai’s from her upper back, Shauna’s from her hair. Jackie gripped the back of her chair and took great, heaving breaths. The bile was stinging in her esophagus, the tears stinging on her cheeks. She couldn’t look at any of them. All she could do was force herself to keep breathing, force the images out of her mind.

“We didn’t have any other options—”

“—couldn’t let you die—”

“Please, Jackie—”

“—can’t be angry, because we didn’t—”

Jackie let a sound bubble out, something between a shriek and a howl. Sharp and short. A desperate plea for silence. It worked.

She regained her sight, taking in their nervous expressions and anxious movements. Not as individuals, but as a unit—moving together, lines between them blurring.

“I’m not mad,” Jackie forced out, “I’m—” she gagged again, but there was nothing coming up, “fuck—” another retch, “I’m sick.”

Tai took her by the elbow and Jackie focused on her face—kind, warm, concerned. It soothed Jackie some, pulled her away from the gruesome thoughts.

“Come on, Jackie,” Tai said gently, “let’s go get you cleaned up, yeah?”

The air was crisp. The waves were rocking even more haphazardly than before. Jackie watched as they crashed onto the sand below, tried to compare the arch of each wave against the last, time the variances.

She and Tai were standing on the back porch, the light overhead flickering every few seconds. They needed to change the bulb, she’d forgotten last time they were there. Jackie took another drag of her cigarette, watched Tai ash hers into the empty planter beside the door.

Tai had helped her. Put toothpaste on her toothbrush and shoved it in her hand, found a sweatshirt in the wardrobe to replace Shauna’s sweater, did all the things that required thinking. Let Jackie slip into muscle memory, let her pull herself together.

“Tai?” Jackie asked, breaking the comfortable silence.

“Hmm?” Tai murmured, lips closed around her cigarette again.

“How did… how’d you stomach it?”

Tai exhaled, smoke blowing back with the wind, framing her cheeks, disappearing into her curls.

“I… I honestly don’t remember.”

Honest, it felt honest. Tai had done what she needed to do. Buried it.

Jackie nodded.

There was a small noise behind them, a scraping sound. They both turned.

Shauna and Van stood on the other side of the glass door, peering out at them. They kept an unnatural distance between them, but wore identical expressions. Pitiful. Terrified. Jackie sighed and went to put out the rest of her smoke.

“Leave them a minute,” Tai advised. “Finish it. They’ve been acting insane, let them sweat. Maybe they’ll shape up.”

Jackie chuckled and turned back around. She took a few more drags, but cut it short.

“I’m going in,” she told Taissa.

“I’m right behind you.” Tai stretched her back, arching until it popped.

Jackie paused.

“Thank you, Tai.”

Jackie liked to be specific with her words—apologies and thanks and confessions. She liked to give the whats and the whys. But she didn’t know how to. Not for this.

“I’ve got you, Jackie.”

Jackie gave her a small smile before sliding the door open.

She had to be strategic here, Shauna and Van staring at her with equally worried expressions, both teetering near panic. Going to one before the other would be a statement. It would force someone to worry and, as fucking annoying as they’d been earlier, Jackie didn’t have the heart to make Shauna or Van wonder if they still had her love.

Jackie threw an arm around each of them, yanking them closer to each other so that she could hug them both at once. Shauna stiffened, arm circling Jackie’s hips. She could feel the confusion in Van’s body, her hand immediately finding Jackie’s waist, but her torso going rigid.

“I love you. Both of you,” Jackie said firmly, chin resting in the place where their shoulders met. Van relaxed against her. Shauna rubbed a thumb over her hip. “I’m not mad at you. Not for… not for that. Not for the past.”

Tai stepped in behind them, shutting and locking the door.

Jackie pulled back, thrust her hands on her hips.

“But I am sick of the fighting. We both are.”

Van and Shauna looked at Tai, she gave them a silent nod, arms crossed against her chest.

“I’m not giving up either of you, so you’re just gonna have to get used to it. You’re big girls, learn how to get along, for fuck’s sake. And, in case you can’t tell, I’m stressed as hell right now, so if one of you picks a fight again, I’m gonna—I’m just gonna… sob my fucking eyes out.”

Shauna let out a breath that was almost a snort.

“I mean it,” Jackie said, pointing at Shauna, finger hovering inches from her chest, “one unkind word, and I will cry so hard you’ll both feel sick. And I won’t stop crying until you have a real, legitimate heart-to-heart.”

Tai chuckled, masking it with a cough.

“I’ll make you… hold hands and look each other in the eyes and talk about all your feelings. Every last one of them. So I suggest you choose to just be fucking… civil to each other instead.”

“Yeah,” Van agreed quickly, pulling Jackie into another hug. Jackie locked her arms around Van’s neck and rubbed her shoulder blade. “Okay, Jack. Okay. I’m sorry.”

It wasn’t an apology to Shauna, but Jackie hadn’t aspired to that. It was a step in the right direction. An apology to her would do for now.

“I honestly can’t tell if I’d enjoy that or if watching it would be torture,” Tai mused.

“I’m betting torture for us, fun for you, and Jackie would start laughing quicker than she thinks,” Shauna mumbled to her.

“You always underestimate me,” Jackie said over Van’s shoulder. “I could hold out.”

“Let’s just agree not to test it,” Van grumbled.

“I love you,” Jackie repeated, releasing her.

“Love you, too. Shauna,” Van nodded once in her direction. Shauna nodded back.

Tai slung an arm around Van’s shoulders.

“Let’s go get this shit over with,” Tai sighed.

“We’ll be right there,” Jackie promised.

Van and Tai made their way back to the dining room, murmuring to each other.

Shauna was anxious, wringing her hands. Hesitating to reach for Jackie.

“So…” Jackie stepped closer to her, “I got puke on your sweater.”

“That’s okay,” Shauna said, bridging the distance between them carefully.

“Yeah, I mean,” Jackie slipped her arms around Shauna’s waist, “not very much. I had pretty good aim if I do say so myself.”

“Oh, I was impressed,” Shauna agreed, a hint of a smile pulling at her lips, taking Jackie’s cheeks between warm hands.

Jackie coaxed her closer, guiding her head to her shoulder. She swayed a little, rocking their bodies side to side. Shauna sighed softly.

“Are we okay, Jax?”

“We’re okay, baby. Everything’s okay.”

“Temperance,” Misty announced, presenting them with the first card from the third row. A winged angel, holding two cups, the water flowing between them defying gravity to form a stream across her body. “Natalie. Balance, the pull between impulsivity and patience, excess, driven by a sense of purpose.”

Misty had prefaced this portion of things, explaining that the next three, the cards forming the second to last row, weren’t roles per se. They were embodiments of how each person behaved out there, rather than assigned duties. In other words, this portion of her dinner theater should move along fairly quickly. Jackie was ready to be done, ready to draw a bath and force Shauna into the tub with her and soak off this night.

“The chariot,” the next card, its rider pulled by two lions, clutching a wand rather than the reins, “Taissa. The illusion of control. Ambition, success, discipline.”

“And the hermit,” Misty held it up, a figure guided by lamplight, holding a staff as tall as they were, “a commonly misunderstood card. People think it’s just for loners and freaks, but —”

“Misty, yes. We get it,” Nat snapped. “It’s complex. Can we do that talk later?”

“Fine,” Misty huffed. “My card, obviously. Isolation, unexpected control, introspection, setting the course for the journey. Short enough for you?”

“Perfect.” Nat poured herself another glass of wine.

“But… there’s the last card,” Misty said, a grin creeping onto her face. “The hanged man.”

A young boy suspended by a tree branch, hanging not by his neck but by his foot, the end of rope that bound him held in his own hand.

“We didn’t know who it was then, it didn’t go to anyone in particular. Just sort of… slid towards the door. I wondered if maybe it was Travis, when I thought he was the only other person to make it out but—”

“Men don’t count,” Lottie scoffed.

“Right. Men don’t count. They aren’t part of… this. But now we know, right? The sacrificial lamb,” Misty drew her finger slowly across her collarbone. “It was Jackie.”

And just like that, Misty fucking Quigley had turned the tables on Jackie, placing the attention back on her. Six faces on her own, now. Misty—gleeful. Nat, Tai, and Shauna—confused. Lottie and Van—petrified.

Jackie took a deep breath and poured herself a glass of water.

That bath was going to have to wait.

18. nowhere near too much

Jackie's hands shook as she raised her glass to her lips, sipping slowly, stomach still unsettled.

Shauna reacted first—taking a breath so deep, so shaky, that the anger in it was palpable, cutting through the room. She didn't even seem to know what she was fuming about, but she was already boiling over.

Jackie set her water down and gripped Shauna's elbow, holding her steady. She couldn't think fast enough. It was everything flashing all at once— constant darkness —lit only by flickering candles that never seemed to illuminate as much as they should, their wax refusing to melt like it should—and bone-chilling cold —Van clutching her to her chest and piling more and more blankets on top of them and breathing hot air on her fingers—and blood —dripping down her wrist and from her chest and staining the ground at her feet and pooling in Lottie's outstretched hands.

"Misty," Nat growled. Jackie couldn't see Nat's face, her hand across her brow, but she could imagine it—eyes narrowed, jaw set, teeth clenching. "Say more words right fucking now."

"I can explain the card, Natalie," Misty said, affronted, "but the rest is up to the people who were… there when it happened."

"Explain," Nat snapped, voice tight and clipped.

"The hanged man is the card of ultimate surrender. Of being suspended in time… and of martyrdom… and of sacrifice for the greater good. So… I'm assuming Jackie has… more scars than just the one she got saving you, Shauna."

Misty left dramatic pauses between her words, long enough for Jackie to notice Shauna's tense inhales and Nat's tapping foot and Van's uncomfortable swallows. She opened her eyes slowly.

"Lottie," Shauna's voice dripped with venom, barbed and aimed and ready to pierce, "what… did you… do to her?"

The pauses Shauna left weren't empty—they hung heavy in the air, smothering every other quiet sound in the room.

"I… I don't…" Tears welled in Lottie's eyes. She crossed her arms in front of her chest, clutching her elbows, looking small and fragile. "I don't fully remember everything from—"

"You better start remembering," Shauna demanded. "Or Van, should I ask you?"

Van paled, clutched her stomach. Tai was eyeing Shauna wearily, fingers ghosting over Van's forearm.

"I can—" Van cleared her throat, "I can try and—"

“No,” Jackie said, squeezing Shauna’s elbow tight, “no, she… Shauna, it’s okay. It was a long time—”

“Fine,” Shauna spat, shifting her gaze back to Lottie. “Fine. Not Van. Lottie, start fucking talking.”

“Shauna, I can tell you,” Jackie offered. “I can… I can tell it.”

“No,” Shauna said, softer, almost gentle, “I want to hear her. I want to hear her tell it. I want her reasoning.”

Lottie’s eyes were clearer—she’d regained her composure. Nat’s gaze flickered nervously between the two of them, at opposite heads of the table. Tai was still locked on Shauna, sitting on the edge of her seat like she may jump up at any moment. Misty leaned back, nursing her pink moscato, setting it down gingerly between each sip.

“It’s not like I can explain everything I was thinking back then, Shauna,” Lottie said carefully, voice stronger with every word. “There are… too many stories we’ve had to tell. The ones to the police and the press and the psychologists and… and the things people told me I was making up and just… I really can’t say I remember it clearly.”

“Shauna, maybe we give her some time to—” Nat started.

“Natalie, shut the fuck up!” Shauna yelled. Truly yelled.

She looked fiery—determined, her eyes darker somehow, her chest rising and falling rhythmically, her hands folded together on the table in front of her. Scary. It was scary.

Scarier, even, when Natalie actually sunk back in her seat, glowering but silent.

“Her blood seemed to go further,” Lottie answered suddenly. “She… a small amount from her went a… a long way. She was special after she came back. She could make things happen. She never got as ill from infection as she should’ve. It was like she… couldn’t die. So… when we were in trouble… yeah. Jackie would… spill blood for… for whoever needed it.”

The room was quiet. Jackie gulped, shifting uncomfortably in her seat, breaking the spell of silence that had fallen over them.

Shauna opened her mouth.

“So—Lot— What?” Nat spoke before Shauna could. “She was your… you just used her as a… a fucking living voodoo doll?”

“Actually, a voodoo doll wouldn’t make sense as—”

“Shut up, Misty!” Nat, Tai, and Shauna together.

Misty pursed her lips and crossed her arms.

“I didn’t want to hurt her,” Lottie mumbled, hand resting over her heart. ‘She… she saved people. Shauna, you during your labor. Taissa,’ Tai jumped, shaking her head to clear it, “when you got sick, Jackie—”

Taissa twitching with illness—Van crying, a hand in her wet curls—Lottie murmuring in strange tongues—Jackie slicing her own arm open without argument.

“No,” Shauna smacked an open palm on the table, the sharp sound echoing through the room. “No more justifications, Lottie.”

The wind was picking up, the house creaking under the strain of it, branches cracking against the window.

“I’m just trying to make you see—”

“Lot,” Van mumbled quietly, “just stop.”

Jackie let out a shaky sigh of relief when Shauna kept her sights on Lottie, rather than turning on Van.

“I don’t care how crazy you are. I see right through you,” Shauna leaned forward, Jackie losing her grip on her elbow when she rested her forearms on the table, hands clasped together again.

“I don’t feel bad for poor, tortured, burdened Charlotte Matthews,” Shauna’s voice was mocking, cloying faux sympathy in every syllable. “This schtick doesn’t work on me.”

“To be perfectly honest with you,” Lottie matched Shauna’s stance, evened her own voice out until it was business-like, eerily calm, “I couldn’t care less what you think about me, Shauna. I do what I have to do. And I’m the fucking reason you’re all sitting here right now.”

The wind howled. Jackie felt a pressure in her ears. Things were building, bubbling to a bursting point and everyone else at the table was seemingly transfixed, unable or unwilling to interfere.

“Guys, I think that’s enough for tonight. Can’t we just—”

Jackie tried to stand, but before her thighs could even leave the seat, Shauna was pushing her back firmly with one hand on her stomach. Shauna’s gaze didn’t falter—she kept her eyes locked on Lottie’s, matching her cold glare the entire time.

Shauna gripped the back of Jackie’s chair and swung a foot out, hooking it behind one of the front legs, using the leverage to jerk Jackie closer to her. She positioned her arm in front of Jackie’s body, slipping her fingers underneath her outer thigh, blocking her off from the rest of the table.

Jackie tried to ignore the sharp ache in her chest— fear —and the dull ache between her legs—one she could worry about later, judge herself for later, when Shauna and Lottie weren’t at each other’s throats.

“If you pull any of that insane shit again,” Shauna said slowly, “I will fucking kill you. If you touch her, I won’t think twice, you crazy fucking bitch.”

Lottie smirked, crossing her legs. Van and Tai exchanged worried glances. Nat smoothed a trembling hand over her forehead.

“I played your game when I had to because I’m not fucking stupid. But if you think I wasn’t just as in control as you were out there, you’ve got no fucking clue who I am.”

Lottie gave a wry chuckle, shaking her head slowly.

“Okay, Shauna. Whatever you say.”

“You know what, Lottie? I hope you do think I’m bluffing,” Shauna’s lips twitched up on one side, forming a small half-smile. “Because that makes my life a hell of a lot easier.”

“Oh, I believe you,” Lottie sighed. “You never think before you act. Not for the big things. That little habit of yours is what made Jackie try to kill herself.”

Everything snapped loose, all at once.

Shauna leapt to her feet, screaming something at Lottie, who mirrored her and shouted back. The wind pressed in on them again. Jackie’s ears ached. Taissa and Nat were on their feet, Tai heading for Shauna, Nat heading for Lottie. Van was yelling something at one of them, or maybe both of them, Jackie couldn’t tell. Misty was holding a useless hand out in each direction, as if she hadn’t stirred this fucking pot all by herself.

“Enough!” Jackie screeched, hands over her ears, still planted in her seat.

At the exact moment Jackie yelled, the entire window shattered, glass pouring into the room. The lights flickered, casting them in and out of darkness. Everyone jumped. Everyone turned to Jackie. Everyone fell absolutely silent.

“Jackie,” Shauna said after a long pause, taking her cheeks between both hands. She surveyed her for harm, as if Jackie might’ve snapped right along with the pane of glass, “are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m… everything’s fine.”

Van and Nat both walked over to inspect the damage, Van kneeling down to peer at the wreckage on the ground, Nat running a finger over the empty frame. Tai looked sick, pale and shaky, slumping back against the wall.

Lottie broke the silence after a full minute of panicked, ragged breathing from the entire group.

“I told you she was special.”

Shauna opened her mouth to respond, but Jackie gripped her sleeve and tugged.

“Shauna,” she whimpered, “enough.”

“Jackie,” Misty said, face lit up in awe, “did you… do that?”

“What?” Jackie mumbled, cocking her head to the side. “I… no. What? It’s windy. It’s gonna storm. I-I—”

“Old house, Misty,” Van said forcefully, shutting down the line of inquiry. Jackie watched as she took long strides back to Taissa, sneaking an arm around her waist to steady her.

Nat took advantage of the interruption.

“Okay,” she stood up straight and waved to the pile of glass on the ground, ‘Misty and I can patch this shit up for the night,’ Misty nodded quickly, falling in at Nat’s side and rolling her sleeves up, “and I think it’s time for the rest of you to go the fuck to bed. We can… we can talk more tomorrow. Nothing good is gonna come from this shit right now.”

Jackie and Shauna were the first ones out of the room, Shauna tearing up the stairs as soon as it was clear that Van was leading Tai to their room downstairs. With every step she climbed, her anger slackened away, replaced with a sadness so thick Jackie could feel it. Even before she heard small sniffles, saw her bat at her eyes, felt the shakiness in her upper body through the hand she had on her lower back—Jackie could sense it.

Shauna tore into their room and headed straight for the bathroom. Jackie carefully shut and locked their door before bridging the gap between them at a jog. Shauna tried to shut the bathroom door behind her, but Jackie caught it, forcing it open and slipping in after her. Shauna gripped the counter, bent forward, eyes screwed shut.

She was hyperventilating and it was better than what Jackie feared most—Shauna going away, losing herself—but the last thing Jackie wanted to do was fetch an overly eager Misty and let her into their room to watch Shauna flinch away from her pushy little hands.

Jackie touched Shauna's forearm, just barely, to gauge her reaction. She whipped her head to the side, looking away. Trying to hide her face. Jackie had only ever seen her cry like this once before—every inhale a wheeze, every exhale a sob.

They were eleven and Shauna had shoved her youngest brother away from her too roughly. He smacked his head on the banister of the stairs and slipped down the few he had left to climb down. He was fine—it was a freak accident, the wrong angle, socks too slippery, foot raised mid-step—but… head wounds bleed and he'd lost consciousness for a moment. Shauna had stayed relatively calm during the immediate aftermath—holding him and sending Jackie to grab her mom from the back porch where she was chatting with a friend—but when she left them alone at the house to take him to the hospital, Shauna lost it.

It was the first time Jackie held anyone like that other than her mother, rocking Shauna back and forth, her skinny arms cradling her. She remembered being grateful in that moment, grateful that she knew what to do. She'd felt grown up, holding Shauna and rubbing her back until her breathing slowed. Calming her down completely, until her heaving sobs were little sniffles and she let Jackie flip the TV on and fell asleep against her while reruns of I Dream of Jeannie played quietly in the background. Jackie'd felt like she could protect her from anything.

She was less confident of that now.

She let her fingers wrap fully around Shauna's arm. Shauna didn't pull away. Good, that's good.

"Oh, sweet thing," she said gently, "no, no. Please, let me—" Jackie sniffled, choking down sympathetic tears. "Oh, honey. Come here. Please."

Shauna buried her face in the crook of her elbow, and slowly twisted toward Jackie. She was overtired, overwhelmed. Crying like a kid. Jackie held her waist and listened to her choke on her tears, her shoulders bouncing with the force of them.

"Sit, Shauna. Sit with me, baby."

Jackie guided her down, resting her own back against the cabinet and stretching her legs out in front of her. She managed to get Shauna just shy of in her lap—seated on the ground next to her, legs tossed over her thighs and upper body against her chest.

“Shhh, shhh,” Jackie whispered, swaying her side to side. “I know. I know, love, but you gotta breathe.”

It took a few minutes of that—Jackie rocking Shauna, mumbling to her—to coax her arm away from her face and to slow her breathing to a rate that didn’t require a house call from nurse Misty.

“I knew it,” Shauna choked out, “I knew you w-were—I knew you were—I kn-knew—”

“Hey, hey,” Jackie rubbed her back harder, “shhh, shhh. It’s okay. Take your time.”

“I knew you weren’t d-dead,” Shauna sobbed.

Jackie’s heart sank impossibly low. Deeper than she thought it could. She forced herself not to cry, willed herself to be stronger.

“I believe you,” she whispered into Shauna’s hair. “I believe you.”

Shauna cried harder.

“Oh, shit, baby. No, I’m—” a sob finally escaped Jackie’s lips, “fuck, I’m sorry.”

The force of Jackie’s tears seemed to slow Shauna’s. Her voice was clearer when she spoke, her body jerking less.

“That’s why I was… that’s why I was so fucking crazy. I knew it. I didn’t believe them,” Shauna rubbed her eyes with a closed fist. Too rough, always too rough with herself. Jackie pried her hand away from her face and guided it to her lap.

“I… I wanted to find you. I thought for sure I would feel it, if you were really gone. I—I wasn’t crazy, I was right. Well, I… I was crazy— am crazy—but… but I was also fucking right.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jackie’s words were thick with tears. She forced Shauna’s face into her neck, felt Shauna relax against her, felt the skin there growing damp. “I’m so sorry, baby. I’m sorry.”

“No. No it isn’t… I’m not saying you did something wrong,” Shauna insisted, pulling away to look at Jackie. Breathing slower, more even. Eyes glassy, but focused. “You couldn’t —you were stuck. And… horrible things were happening to you.”

Jackie shook her head. Not because horrible things weren’t happening to her back then. They were. But she’d made peace with them. She’d granted her forgiveness, she’d understood the reasons, she’d moved forward. Jackie palmed Shauna’s cheek, holding it steady, because she thought she knew where this was going.

“And I knew you were alive. I knew it. But I let them convince me I was wrong and I… gave up. I gave up on you again. I let all this fucking shit happen to you.”

Jackie brought her free hand to the back of Shauna’s head, holding her in place.

“You were stuck too, Shauna.”

“What?” Shauna’s sobs had quieted to small cries, her eyes narrowed and forehead creased in confusion as she met Jackie’s gaze.

“You said I was stuck,” Jackie brushed a tear off Shauna’s cheek with the thumb that rested there. “I was stuck. But so were you.”

“Not as much as—”

For the second time that day, Jackie kissed Shauna to shut her up.

This time it wasn’t rough. It couldn’t be—they both had to break away every few seconds, lips parting just enough to get some air in their lungs, because they were both still sort of crying and neither of them could really breathe.

The angle was awkward. Jackie slid forward enough to leave a gap between her back and the cabinet and gripped Shauna’s hips, guiding her to sit properly in her lap. Shauna resisted, tried to say something in protest, but Jackie just kissed her harder and tugged impatiently until she complied. She sat how Jackie had every time they’d done this—ending a fit of tears this way, which was starting to happen a lot —secured in Jackie’s lap with her legs crossed behind Jackie’s body and her arms locked around her neck. Jackie slipped both hands under Shauna’s shirt, holding her ribcage to pull her closer.

They kissed until Shauna pulled away to gulp down deep breaths, perching her chin on Jackie’s shoulder. Neither of them were crying anymore.

“We can’t change it,” Jackie whispered, afraid to speak too loudly, to break whatever spell they’d fallen under that left Shauna calm and comfortable against her.

“I know,” Shauna whispered back. “I’m sorry. I feel fucking… stupid. Out of control.”

“Mmm,” Jackie hummed, squeezing her closer, “so do I. I think it would be… crazier if we didn’t.”

“Probably,” Shauna said quietly.

“But, my love… you have got to stop threatening to kill people.”

“But she—”

“No buts,” Jackie insisted. ‘That was… really fucking hot. Like… I’m kind of concerned about how hot I found that,’ Shauna breathed out a little laugh through her nose, “but you can’t do that. Not with them.”

“Yeah… okay,” Shauna begrudgingly agreed, sliding off of Jackie’s lap despite her little whines of protest.

It was a halfhearted commitment, but Jackie let it go because Shauna sat facing her wearing a small, sad smile and she was beautiful. It pulled at Jackie, she felt it in her chest—how fucking perfect Shauna looked, even with her cheeks pink and splotchy and the tip of her nose red and her eyes swollen.

“What?” Shauna asked, a little suspicious, smile inching towards something happier. She used both hands to wipe her cheeks off, then ran them through her hair to push it back off her face.

“You,” Jackie answered with a grin, shrugging.

“Just… me?” Shauna scrunched her nose in confusion.

“Yeah. You,” Jackie repeated. “Pretty. You’re so… ridiculously, fucking pretty.”

Shauna rolled her eyes and chuckled, shoving her hair back again.

“I mean it,” Jackie opened the drawer above their heads, feeling around for a hairbrush and tie, “you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my entire life.”

Jackie sat up on her knees.

“Okay,” Shauna laughed, sniffing and wiping under her eyes, “I find that hard to believe, but thank you.”

Jackie scooted until she was behind her, running the brush through her hair, loosening the knots made by both of them touching it so much this evening. Shauna let her head fall back a bit.

“You’re perfect,” Jackie sighed, gathering her hair in one hand and twisting the tie around it with the other. “It’s ridiculous how beautiful you are.”

Jackie secured her hair in a low bun and pulled her close from behind, forcing her to lean back against her chest, kissing her cheek and letting her nose linger against it.

“I love you,” Shauna said, gripping Jackie’s arms.

“I love you, too,” Jackie promised, “so, so fucking much.”

“Did you wanna go to bed?” Shauna asked, sitting forward and twisting around to look at Jackie.

“No!” Jackie snapped. Shauna looked taken aback. “I mean… if you’re tired we can. Of course we can. It’s just that we were supposed to have a bath.”

Shauna laughed, shaking her head.

“You didn’t tell me we were supposed to have a bath, Jax.”

“Oops,” Jackie stood and offered Shauna a hand, “I guess I didn’t, huh?”

Shauna pulled herself up and Jackie immediately slipped her arms around her neck.

“So… can we have a bath?” Jackie asked, focused on Shauna’s cheeks, the way they curved with her smile, the way she wanted to squeeze them.

They went red, color spreading from the apples of them back to her hairline. Shauna held Jackie’s waist loosely.

“Yeah,” Shauna said, clearing her throat, “of course.”

“What’s wrong?” Jackie gave into her urge to touch Shauna’s cheeks, tapping her index finger against one lightly.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Shauna said, too quickly. “What would be wrong?”

“I don’t know… that’s why I asked. Do you not… do you not like doing that or something? I know it can be like, a little much, but this tub is big.”

Jackie searched Shauna's eyes. She could feel herself floundering, talking in circles. She could feel herself sinking into that place. The one where she felt like she'd made a mistake, like she'd ruined everything somehow, like the littlest thing was going to push Shauna away because why would Shauna forgive her for this? Why would Shauna want to be close to her like that right now, when she'd just finished telling Jackie how fucking horrible everything had been because of her? Shauna was frozen and Jackie couldn't stop talking.

"Like, so big. It isn't as… claustrophobic as a normal one, but if you really don't like—"

"I don't know if I like it," Shauna interrupted.

Jackie's mind was trying to catch up, she was yanking herself out of her shame spiral and couldn't make sense of Shauna's words.

"What?" she asked dumbly.

"I don't know if… I've never done that with…" Shauna cleared her throat again and shifted her weight, "with anyone."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Oh… I just assumed…"

"I haven't been… all that—fuck. I don't know," Shauna chewed on her lip, rolled her eyes up in that way that could be annoyance but was actually embarrassment, 'intimate with people. It's not really my… thing. Sex, sure. But like… I'm not like this,' Shauna waved between them, "with… with other people."

"It's not your thing?" Jackie said carefully.

It's not her thing. Intimate isn't her thing. Cloying and suffocating and overbearing is all Jackie had fucking been and it isn't her thing.

"Not really," Shauna mumbled. "It makes me… uncomfortable, I guess."

Jackie's heart hammered in her chest. Stupid. Fucking stupid.

"Have I been making you uncomfortable?" The words tumbled out so quickly there was barely a pause between them, turning the question into one, rushed thought.

"No!" Shauna snapped, eyes wide. "No. No, I love you."

Shauna grabbed Jackie's hips, her fingers digging in. Steadying her. Steadying both of them.

"I know you love me. I meant… if I'm too much you can tell me," Jackie's voice was cracking, pitching higher. "I don't wanna make you uncomfortable. I don't have to be so fucking… clingy."

"No, Jax. No, that's not what I'm—You're not too much. You're nowhere near too much. You're perfect. This is perfect."

Shauna tucked Jackie's hair behind her ear, kissing her cheek briefly before pulling back to look at her, forcing eye contact with a finger crooked under her chin.

“Everything with you has been… amazing. I love it. I love you. I love how much you touch me. I love showering with you and holding you when we sleep and… all of it. I do.”

She paused like she was waiting for something, but Jackie’s throat felt thick. She felt fucking shy all of a sudden, a way she hadn’t felt in years. She nodded so that Shauna would continue.

“It’s just… new. I’m not normally like this. So I don’t… I’m not always sure what I’m doing,” Shauna pinched the bridge of her nose, gave a shallow, frustrated sigh. “God, I feel fucking dumb. Why am I making this a big deal? It’s a fucking bath.”

Jackie’s pulse slowed. She smiled at Shauna, played with the baby hairs at the nape of her neck. They were in the same place—uncertain, overthinking, insecure.

“Jesus, I’m sor—”

“It is a big deal. Everything is a big deal right now,” Jackie assured her. “When we first got to that Airbnb and I was unloading groceries and you… you came up behind me and wrapped your arms around my stomach? Just like you used to. Remember?”

“I remember,” Shauna nodded. The blush had faded—cheeks pale pink instead of ruddy red. Jackie traced them again, fingers feather-light.

“I was absolutely fucking losing it,” Jackie continued. “Like… wow. Like… we hadn’t even kissed yet, and I very much wanted to fuck you right there in that kitchen.”

Shauna laughed—surprised, happy, light. Jackie felt her shoulders relax as she grinned back at her.

“God, I would’ve let you.”

Shauna caught Jackie’s wrist in her hand, held Jackie steady with her palm against Shauna’s cheek.

“Oh trust me, I know that now. But I was also anxious. More unsure of myself than I have been since… well, since I was a teenager, really. All of this is big. We didn’t think we’d get this. And… it sounds like you’ve maybe been a little… closed off to certain things for a long time? Like… love things.”

Shauna laughed so hard it knocked Jackie’s hand away from her cheek. She pressed her forehead to Jackie’s temple to speak low in her ear.

“A little is a fucking understatement, but I appreciate you trying to make it sound less insane. Completely. Completely closed off. You’re… it. You’re the only one.”

Another tug at Jackie’s chest—but Shauna still sounded light. She wasn’t mourning right now, she was stating a fact.

“Yeah,” Jackie sighed, rubbing the back of Shauna’s neck slowly, “so I’m gonna draw a bath, and we’re gonna see how you like it. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Jackie twisted on the water, perching herself at the edge of the tub. It was a built-in, filling the entire corner of the bathroom, the wide ledge surrounding it tiled in something expensive

and smooth and cream colored. The bay window usually gave a clear view of the ocean, but the moon wasn't bright enough to cut through the fog rolling in and reveal the waves.

The tub was huge—jacuzzi size, truly big enough for multiple people. When it was half-full, Jackie dumped in a huge scoop of the epsom salts that sat in an amber jar next to the tap. At three-quarters full Jackie piled her own hair up on top of her head, secured it with a claw clip to keep it off her neck, and shrugged off her clothes.

She was quick, sitting back down and crossing her legs, her weight resting on one hand as she leaned back to hold the other over the water and feel the steam rising from it. She watched as Shauna finished undressing—eyes locked on her as she slid her underwear off her legs, pulled her red tee over her head, unhooked her bra and let it drop to the ground.

When Jackie looked back at Shauna's face, she found her splitting her gaze between Jackie's body and the middle-distance, staring off toward the window to avoid eye contact. Her chest was flushed pink and she had one arm crossed in front of her, fingers clinging to the crook of her neck.

Jackie turned the tap off and Shauna made to step in quickly. Jackie swung an arm out in front of her hips so that she had to stop, just as her shins knocked into the side of the tub. Shauna frowned at her.

"Does your shoulder hurt?" Jackie asked, massaging her hip slowly, her thumb digging in just above the bone.

"A little bit, yeah," Shauna admitted. It wasn't just that—Jackie could tell. She could sense the shyness in her movements, but she was giving her an out.

"Then let me get in first, beautiful," Jackie directed, sliding the hand on Shauna's hip up her body until it rested in the center of her chest, forcing her to drop her arm to her side. "You should soak it."

"It's okay," Shauna said, catching Jackie's hand in her own and wrapping her fingers around it. "You're so… tiny, I don't want—"

"I am not so tiny, Shauna," Jackie insisted, rolling her eyes. She swung her legs over the side and sank down into the water, her back against the sloped porcelain, sitting up enough that she could open her arms and motion Shauna to get in front of her. "C'mere."

Shauna sighed, but listened, stepping in and carefully sinking down between Jackie's legs, her back pressed to her chest. There was enough room that they could've sat shoulder to shoulder if they wanted to and Jackie knew she could sit the opposite way, back against the longer edge, and still straighten her legs all the way out—this tub was her favorite part of the entire fucking house.

Shauna laid against her, her head resting on Jackie's shoulder, but she was stiff, holding her weight.

"Mmm-mmm," Jackie hummed her disapproval, securing her arms around Shauna's torso, just beneath her ribcage, "relax."

"I am relaxing," Shauna argued, covering Jackie's arms with her own.

"Oh, yeah?" Jackie laughed, nudging Shauna's cheek with her nose.

“Yes,” Shauna said, giggling as Jackie started pressing quick kisses to her face.

Jackie couldn’t help it—her previous worries about being too much long forgotten, eclipsed by the need to kiss Shauna’s cheek, her temple, the side of her nose, everywhere she could reach from this angle, until Shauna actually relaxed against her, laughing and batting her face away gently.

“There,” Jackie said, “much better.”

They sat quietly for a few minutes, Shauna scratching soft nails over Jackie’s arms. Jackie had to ask. She had to bring up what Shauna had said to Lottie earlier—they couldn’t ignore it, couldn’t let it sit there between them, unaddressed.

“Shauna?”

“Hmm?” Shauna turned her head to the side, nose brushing against Jackie’s neck.

“You said… to Lottie you said you were just as in control of things as she was. What… I mean, what does that mean?”

Shauna stiffened again. Jackie craned her neck to press a reassuring kiss to her lips and she slackened.

“I… fuck. I haven’t had to explain this in—actually, I guess I’ve never had to explain this.”

“Take your time,” Jackie soothed, drawing shapes on her stomach.

“I didn’t… I wasn’t as far gone as Lottie,” Shauna said quietly, “Well, fuck I definitely was, just… not in that way.”

Jackie nodded against her.

“I could see what she was doing. I knew I couldn’t actually say no when she asked me for approval. She believed in the symbolism but… if it didn’t go her way she’d twist it. I knew she’d find a reason for me not to matter anymore.”

You don’t matter anymore. Lottie’s cool dismissal, Shauna’s icy glare, the cold pressing in, the snow coming down.

Jackie shuddered.

“Hey,” Shauna gripped her arms tighter, “are you sure you wanna talk about this right now?”

“Yeah. Yeah, just… a little cold.”

Shauna tried to sit up and Jackie squeezed her tighter.

“Let me try something. I’m overheated,” Shauna pried Jackie’s arms away from her stomach, “and I wanna look at you, anyway.”

Jackie reluctantly released Shauna, who managed to get up on her knees and turn to face Jackie. She slipped her hand under the back of Jackie’s left knee and pulled up.

“Here, put your legs on this side,” Shauna instructed. Jackie obeyed, slipping both her legs to the right of Shauna’s body. “Slide down.”

Shauna nodded as Jackie sank lower—all cute and focused, satisfied with her work —and sat perpendicular to Jackie, her back against the long side of the tub, her legs out in front of her so that her thighs rested on top of Jackie’s abdomen. Her knees had to stay slightly bent, but there was enough room that she wasn’t uncomfortable. Jackie knew, because she’d sat just like that in this tub before.

“Good?” Shauna asked, shifting to sink just a little lower.

The water came up just beneath her breasts, her entire chest bright red from the heat, steam billowing up from her shoulders.

“Good,” Jackie nodded, holding Shauna’s thighs in place.

“This bathtub is insane,” Shauna mused. “It’s more like a fucking hot tub.”

“You comfortable?” Jackie asked. In every sense of the word, she added in her head.

“Very,” Shauna promised with a smile, palming Jackie’s cheek like she knew what Jackie was really asking. “And I like looking at you, we’ve established this.”

Jackie giggled in response and Shauna drew her hand away, resting it on Jackie’s chest.

“So,” Shauna started again, “I knew Lottie wouldn’t actually let me say no. So I… I sort of… influenced who she picked.”

Shauna chewed her lip, waiting for a reaction from Jackie.

“So you… you like, guided her into picking who you wanted to die?”

“Sort of,” Shauna shrugged. Jackie ran a hand up and down the length of her thigh. “More like… like guided her away from who I didn’t want to die. But… but yeah, basically.”

“How?”

“I don’t know… I was just good at… making her see what I wanted her to see.”

“Good at manipulating people,” Jackie sighed. “You’ve always been that way.”

Fuck. Jackie had no idea why she’d let that tumble out of her mouth.

Shauna swallowed hard, looking away as a frown pulled at her lips. Frustrated, but trying not to be. Jackie squeezed her thigh until she made eye contact again.

“It isn’t a judgment, baby. It’s just a… thing,” Jackie clarified. “You know what I’m saying.”

“Yeah. Well… Lottie looked to the things Tai did while she was sleepwalking as inspiration or something,” Shauna’s jaw relaxed, Jackie’s slight seemingly forgotten. “She took messages from it. She’d ask me what I saw. Tai and I took care of each other. I watched over her when the sleepwalking was bad, she watched over me when I was… was…”

Jackie took Shauna’s hand, interlocking their fingers. Stay with me. Shauna took a deep breath and continued.

“Anyway, I had some power there. To influence things. And I used it.”

“That makes sense,” Jackie brought Shauna’s hand up to her lips, kissing the back of it before dropping it back on her chest, just below her neck. Shauna left it there, fingers splayed across Jackie’s breastbone.

They sat in silence for a few minutes until Jackie decided to break it.

“Will you add hot water?”

The water had cooled some, warm rather than scalding, but Jackie mostly wanted Shauna to have to move to reach the tap so that she could coax her back into her arms. She didn’t know what exactly it was, but Jackie felt this compulsion to have Shauna pressed fully against her. Like earlier, when she suddenly needed Shauna to lay on top of her, to feel her weight pressing her into the mattress. She wanted Shauna back in front of her, completely relaxed against her.

Jackie’s plan worked—she sat up a bit as Shauna let old water out and new water in and, when Jackie beckoned her back over, she made it clear where she wanted her. Shauna obliged without argument, settling between her legs again.

“You know what scares me most about getting found out? Like… people knowing I’m me?” Jackie smoothed her hand over Shauna’s hair.

“What?” Shauna asked quietly.

“My fucking parents. Forty-three years old and I’m still more afraid of those assholes than anything else.”

Shauna laughed—short and humorless.

“Yeah, they have not changed one fucking bit.”

Jackie’s hand froze, hovering over her scalp.

“You still see them?”

“Every year,” Shauna said with a sigh.

“What?” Jackie let the hand that had been petting Shauna fall to join the one resting on her stomach. “Why the hell would—”

“Your birthday,” Shauna interrupted forcefully. “Every year on… on your birthday.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

“Me and Jeff.”

Fucking hell.

“They made me—” Shauna cleared her throat. It snapped Jackie into gear. She started drawing shapes against Shauna’s skin again—circles and triangles next to her navel. Shauna tilted her head towards Jackie’s, forehead pressed against her neck. “They made me blow out your fucking birthday candles.”

“Holy fucking shit.”

Jackie didn't realize she'd said it aloud until Shauna echoed her.

"Yeah… holy fucking shit is right." Shauna's voice was thick. Heavy. But she wasn't crying. She sounded almost… desensitized. Like it was someone else's story she was recounting. "For the first five or six years I sobbed through it. The whole time. They just… watched."

Fucking assholes. Fucking evil goddamn monsters.

"If I didn't get them all in one go, they—they relit them. Made me start all over. Sang again, and everything."

"Oh, Shauna—"

"When Callie was a baby," Shauna pressed on, gripping Jackie's arms tighter, "I cried so hard I actually passed out. Hyperventilated. I was dehydrated, too, so… Jeff had to take me to the hospital. I didn't talk for three weeks after that, I guess. Not one word. I don't really remember much."

Jackie felt sick—like nausea building again, like a sharp ache in her chest, like her actual heart was being squeezed too tight—but Shauna wasn't done. Jackie bit her tongue.

"The next year, when I told him we were going back… he didn't talk to me for days after that. Worst fucking argument we ever had. We don't really… argue. We don't… care enough to argue. But that… he was pissed."

"Why?" Jackie choked out. "Why'd you go?"

"Because I deserve—I thought I deserved it," Shauna answered, nudging Jackie's neck with her nose. "I still go. I was there this year, too. And I… I'd go in your room. Say I needed to go to the bathroom and… and go in your room."

Jackie tilted to the side to connect their lips. She kissed Shauna long enough to center herself, to fight back the tears burning behind her eyes.

"You are never, ever seeing those fucking freaks again," she mumbled against Shauna's lips, breaking the kiss.

Shauna pressed her forehead against Jackie's.

"I do think that if they find out," Shauna whispered, tone serious, "I could give at least one of them a fucking heart attack just by kissing you."

Jackie laughed first, Shauna maintaining her composure a beat longer.

"I think you're totally fucking right about that."

"Are you ever gonna wear your own pajamas again?" Shauna pulled at the hem of the dark blue tee shirt Jackie wore as a nightgown.

"Uhh, no?" Jackie pulled the comforter over them as she laid facing Shauna. "Of course not. I'm honestly a little offended that you want me to."

“I didn’t say I didn’t like it,” Shauna said, slinging an arm across Jackie’s waist. “I was just asking.”

They’d left one of the lamps on, a warm glow falling over them. Jackie cupped Shauna’s cheek, squeezing a little.

“Good, because you don’t really get a choice.”

“Oh, no?” Shauna asked, smiling. Jackie felt the apple of her cheek move under her palm.

“Mmmm… nope.”

Shauna pulled her closer, kissing her deeply—her tongue immediately slipping between Jackie’s lips, little needy noises coming from the back of her throat. After a few minutes, Jackie slipped the tie out of her hair so she could thread her fingers through it and swung a leg over Shauna’s. Shauna started to stroke Jackie’s thigh slowly and when she edged higher, fingers resting where her thigh met her hip, Jackie broke away.

“Baby, I love you,” Jackie panted. “You are so fucking hot it drives me crazy. But I cannot have sex for a third time today. I can’t do it. And honestly, that second time really should count for like… at least two rounds.”

Shauna’s eyes widened in surprise, then she chuckled and kissed Jackie again—brief but firm.

“I’m not trying to fuck you, Jax,” she assured, pulling back to get a clear view of her.

“No?”

“No. I’m tired, too. I was just… I don’t know. Making out with you a little.”

The sheepish smile on her face was the sweetest thing—a newer version of the one burned into Jackie’s brain, the exact replica of the look Shauna gave her in their teens. Whenever Jackie told her she loved her, whenever Shauna made her come, whenever they snuck off together at a party.

“Well… I love that,” Jackie grinned.

“Yeah?” Shauna asked, inching closer.

“Yeah,” Jackie whispered.

Just as Shauna was about to reconnect their lips, Jackie put a hand on her chest and nudged her away.

Shauna’s eyes snapped open.

“You called me your girlfriend. Earlier, I mean,” Jackie blurted. “Am I… is that real?”

Shauna blushed, color flooding her nose and cheeks.

“Yeah, I mean… it just slipped out,” Shauna said quickly. “But I thought—don’t you want—do you… do you not want that?”

Jackie placed both hands on Shauna’s chest, thumbs sweeping side to side.

“I do. I want that. Like… really want that.”

“Okay,” Shauna swallowed, nodding. “Okay, good.”

“But—”

“But?”

“But you better mean it.”

Shauna squeezed Jackie’s thigh and Jackie hummed in response. She’d never had anyone return to that spot habitually, hand nestled so comfortably beneath her hip bone, fingers clutching the little roll of fat and skin that appeared at the very top of her thigh when she bent her knee up. It was new—Shauna hadn’t done this before, this would’ve been much too bold for them at 18. Jackie’s chest ached—she wondered if Shauna had started doing this with someone else. She’d cheated with men before, why not women?

“Jackie… how could I not mean it? I’m like, literally crazy about you.”

“I think you do. But… I also think you don’t really understand what that word means.”

Jackie chewed her lip, hiding her fingers in Shauna’s hair, steadily recreating all the knots she’d eased out of it earlier.

“You don’t think I know what the word girlfriend means?” Shauna smirked. “Would you like me to define it for you?”

“No. Not the word, smartass,” Jackie chastised. “The… the action. The… being someone’s girlfriend. My girlfriend. Being with me. Like, for real. For good.”

“I need you to tell me more,” Shauna said, her smile fading, “because to me it means… we keep doing this. Forever. But I feel like you’re getting at something else.”

Jackie stilled her hand, resting it on the side of Shauna’s head.

“Okay, just like… don’t get mad.”

Shauna jerked her head back, startled and pouting.

“Jackie, just say whatever it is you want to—”

“I don’t think you’ve ever not been a serial fucking cheater,” Jackie said quickly, biting her lip harshly as she watched Shauna’s expression go terrifyingly neutral.

Here goes nothing.

“And—and I think you get off on it,” she added, pausing for a second to give Shauna room to speak. She didn’t. “So… so before you tell me you wanna commit to me, you better be sure as hell that you’re not gonna do that shit to me.”

Shauna looked stunned, like Jackie had smacked her across the face. Like she’d dumped ice-cold water on her or revealed some deep, dark secret. She wasn’t going to speak yet, and Jackie wasn’t going to leave this heavy silence between them.

“If you can’t do that… if you can’t be… faithful,” Jackie wiped away the tears suddenly collecting under her eyes, “you—you tell me and that’s okay. We’ll make it work. I’ll be your friend.”

Shauna's mouth dropped open, and Jackie would've been worried that she'd gone away if she wasn't staring at Jackie so hard it felt like she was peering into her fucking soul.

"But if—if you do commit to this and you do anything remotely shady… I will fuck you over so hard."

Jackie felt tears sliding down her face, running across the bridge of her nose and dripping onto the satin pillowcase. Shauna's expression didn't change, but she brushed them away with a tentative finger.

"There's not much you could do to make—make me mad. Not much I won't forgive. But that? From you? Again? No," Jackie shook her head firmly. "Absolutely not."

Shauna blinked at Jackie a few times, bringing her hand away from her tear-streaked face and back to its spot on her thigh.

"Are you done?" Shauna didn't sound judgmental or snappy—it was a genuine question.

"Yeah—yes," Jackie sniffed. "I think… I think so, but I reserve the right to be… undone."

She ran the back of her hand across her nose and hiccuped. She'd meant to sound tough, sure of herself, when she had this conversation. She also hadn't planned on having this particular conversation right now, but neither of those things had panned out. Clearly. Fuck.

"You can always be undone, baby," Shauna said, the corners of her lips pulled up into a gentle smile. "I'm committed. I promise to never cheat on you. I don't know where you think I'd find the time to cheat on you, anyway, when I can't even stand being away—"

"I'm not joking," Jackie whined. "This isn't a—a thing to joke about."

"Jax, I'm not joking ei—"

"Because—because if you fucking cheat on me," Jackie's voice had gone tough now, even if her shaking hands and watery eyes were giving her away, "like, even something as simple as a drunk kiss? I'm talking a fucking peck on the lips. Imagine how mad I'd be."

Shauna opened her mouth to respond and Jackie pushed forward.

"Not Jeff, not… someone else , not someone who's normal about you. Me. Imagine how mad I would be. Are you imagining?"

Shauna didn't answer.

Jackie tugged a lock of her hair twice, frowning at her.

"Sorry, yes. I'm having a hard time keeping track of when you actually want me to respond but yes, I'm imagining."

"Okay, good," Jackie nodded. "Now triple it. Something I would brush off with another woman—y'know, shit happens. Not with you. Never with you. Shit can't happen. I will not be fucking normal about it."

Jackie's chest heaved with effort. She wasn't sure she'd taken a deep breath that entire time. She honestly felt like she'd blacked out a little, unsure of everything she'd said or how she managed to spit it out so quickly.

“Can I talk now?” Shauna asked softly.

Jackie nodded, dazed.

“I cheated because I was chasing something. A rush. It did feel good. Because it felt like something . I didn’t just sleep around,” Shauna’s tone was even, measured. She was calm and focused. Jackie slid her hand down to the center of her chest.

“I also drove 110 on the freeway. I’ve… gotten on flights without telling anyone.”

Jackie tried to speak, to tell her all of that was absolutely off the table also. Shauna shook her head— let me finish.

“I’ve been a… dead woman walking for most of my life. I did those things to try and feel alive. Not all the time. Not even often. No… most of the time I just stayed in my little box and did my little fucking chores.”

Jackie wrapped her leg further around Shauna’s, closing the minuscule gap between them.

“It’s always been about you,” Shauna mumbled. “Even back then. I wanted to know if I could feel a fraction of what I felt for you for… anyone else. I didn’t.”

Jackie nodded, tried to remind herself she wasn’t an awful fucking person for bringing this up. That it was a valid concern, that it needed to be addressed, even if she wanted to take every fucking word of it back.

“I don’t ever wanna be anywhere you aren’t. I don’t wanna let you out of my fucking sight,” Shauna was smiling again, just barely. “And you might think that’s temporary. That it’s the… novelty and it’ll wear off. But it isn’t. I know it isn’t.”

Jackie slid her hand behind Shauna’s neck, brushing her thumb back and forth over the nape of it.

“Because I wanna make up for every fucking second we didn’t have. I cried the other day because you were in the shower for too long. And I missed you. How fucking pathetic is that?”

Jackie gave a watery laugh and Shauna grinned.

“I can’t sleep, because I’d rather listen to you breathe. It’s sick. I’m addicted to you. More now, obviously. But… then too. I’ve never been normal about you,” Shauna jostled Jackie gently with the grip she still had on her leg. “I don’t even know what that would look like. I don’t ever wanna spend a single night away from you. You travel for work right?”

“Yeah,” Jackie answered, sniffing.

“Okay, well, guess who’s gonna be there waiting in the hotel room for you?”

Jackie laughed, smiled wide, her eyes falling closed briefly. Shauna took her cheek in her hand and Jackie looked at her. She was smiling earnestly, brows lifted.

“I’m so fucking serious. I don’t even wanna go to bed before you. I don’t care how exhausted I am, I’ll wait until you’re tired. I wanna cook every fucking meal you eat. I wanna fuck you every single day. I wanna drive you around to every errand you have to run and push the fucking cart for you.”

“Wow, Shauna. That’s like… a little obsessive,” Jackie joked, pulling the best straight face she could manage.

“Oh, please,” Shauna rolled her eyes. “I am going to be the… most annoying, clingy, needy girlfriend in the entire fucking world. I will never, ever cheat on you. I promise you. I don’t care about… anyone else. It’s all you, Jackie. Forever.”

Jackie raised an eyebrow at her.

“This is sounding… suspiciously like a fucking proposal right now, Shauna.”

Shauna laughed, cheeks scrunched up, lines pulling at the corners of her eyes.

“If you wanna call me your wife right now you can. Call me whatever you want. Give me whatever fake last name you have right now,” Shauna paused and tilted her head at Jackie. “Is it weird that I don’t even know what it is?”

“Price,” Jackie giggled.

“Price. Sure, call me Mrs. Price. I don’t care.”

“Why would I do that?” Jackie asked, trailing her index finger across Shauna’s cheekbone.

Names had meant nothing to Jackie for most of her life—fleeting things, things of chance and or thoughtless choice and of little consequence. But Jackie needed Shauna to be Shipman again. To kick Sadecki into orbit at all costs, yes. But to be Shipman. That was a name that Jackie could care about.

“I don’t know. That’s not the point. The point is I’ll do whatever you want. You want a piece of paper? I’ll marry you tomorrow.”

Jackie dragged her finger down Shauna’s nose.

“Well, you can’t because—”

“Right, the already married thing. Yeah. So give me a month or two. Or not. Or we never need to do that shit. Whatever, I don’t care. I want you just like this. Just how I have you now. And I’ll do whatever you want me to, to show you that I wanna keep it this way.”

Jackie traced her jaw.

“Mmm, this way but… without the five other women and the whole cult murder escapade situation, right? Because I don’t know how long I can do that for.”

“Jackie, I would do this forever. I would live in this fancy ass house with these crazy fucking bitches for the rest of our lives if that’s what you wanted.”

“God, I do not want that,” Jackie groaned.

“Good, neither do I,” Shauna chuckled. “This really is hell.”

“I did miss them, though,” Jackie mumbled, moving to press closer to Shauna, head tucked under her chin, cheek pressed to her chest, “Well… I missed Taissa and Natalie.” Shauna laughed, wrapping her arms around Jackie and burying her nose in her hair. “Did you miss anyone? Is it… nice being around them again for you at all?

“Yeah,” Shauna said reluctantly, “it actually is. Just… not this close.”

“No, definitely not this close”

“And if you tell them I said that,” Shauna added, “I’m denying it.”

Jackie nodded against Shauna, slipping a hand under her shirt and running it all the way up her back until her palm rested between her shoulder blades.

“Are you serious with the fucking I could be your friend shit?” Shauna asked.

“Your friend who harbors an obsessive crush on you and is deeply enamored with everything you do?” Jackie countered, tilting her head up, chin digging into Shauna’s sternum, so that she could kiss the underside of her jaw while she chuckled. “Sure. We’ve done that before.”

“Yeah, well…” Shauna murmured, “that didn’t go so well.”

“Mmm, fair,” Jackie yawned.

She scratched her nails over Shauna’s back—slow, lazy circles. Small—just as wide as her wrist allowed her to go with her forearm still pressed to Shauna’s spine.

Shauna moaned lightly, squeezed Jackie closer.

“You still like that,” Jackie observed quietly, eyes heavy, lids fluttering shit.

“Mhmm.”

“Does… did he do…” Jackie trailed off, pressed her forehead against Shauna’s chest.

“No,” Shauna answered, a little sadness creeping into her voice. “He—no, Jackie. Everything you did I… I kept it just you.”

A quiet moment passed—their breaths slowing, evening out, falling in time with each other.

“I love you,” Jackie whispered.

“I love you, too.” Shauna’s voice was heavy with sleep.

Jackie thought about reaching over to switch the lamp off, but she nuzzled closer instead, scratching Shauna’s back until she drifted to sleep.

19. connected to you

2001

“Jack. Jack, wake up. You’re okay. Wake up.”

Jackie’s eyes snapped open. She was confused, searching for landmarks in the darkness. A lamp flicked on and she sunk the heels of her palms into her eye sockets for a moment, trying to press away the tears. There was movement next to her, a few delicate fingers barely brushing her wrist. Asking permission. She felt hair tickle her bare shoulder.

It was the scent of her that grounded Jackie—soap and lavender and that persistent hint of tobacco. Jackie bobbed her head, sobbing harder. She wasn’t sure what she was saying yes to, but she needed more.

Van’s fingers closed around her wrist and urged her hand away from her face. They didn’t pull or tug—there was no force in it. There never was with Van. Everything was gentle suggestion, occasional firm guidance when it was absolutely necessary, but Van never demanded.

Jackie followed her lead, dropping both hands onto her lap. She closed them in tight fists, her thumbnails pressing repeatedly into the sides of her index fingers as she tried to slow the tears.

“Honey,” Van mumbled, slipping the fallen strap of Jackie’s tank top back onto her shoulder. Her fingers were feather-light, brushing repeatedly over Jackie’s skin. Jackie shivered. She wanted more. More touch, more direction, more everything. She wanted Van. She did.

But she wanted Shauna more.

Shauna who was engaged to Jeff. Shauna who hated her. Shauna who’d screamed at Jackie in that fucking nightmare until she’d lost her voice entirely. Shauna and the deep brown of her hair and her eyes and her soft hands that always seemed to dig and squeeze.

“I— Fuck,” Jackie gasped, “S-sorry, I just had a—”

“It’s okay,” Van insisted. Her lips took the place her hand had occupied, grazing over Jackie’s skin. Jackie’s shoulders relaxed. “Come here.”

Jackie studied Van—red hair, blue eyes. Rough, calloused hands that were always tender. Dressed in her wrinkled, long-sleeve Lilith Fair tee and a pair of plaid boxer shorts from the cheap pack Jackie had picked up for her last month. She pulled back their comforter—simple and mauve, hem fraying from the shitty dryer in their shitty apartment—and beckoned Jackie toward her. She was visibly worried, a pretty frown pulling at her lips and narrowing her eyes. Her hair was tossed over one shoulder and, as Jackie lifted herself onto her lap, she fanned it out so she could bury her nose in it.

Jackie sat facing her, legs crossed behind her back, and Van immediately met the embrace —holding Jackie close and rubbing circles low on her spine. It felt good. Van felt good, holding Jackie how she liked to be held, brushing her lips against Jackie's neck slowly, rocking Jackie side to side as her entire body shook and convulsed with fresh sobs. But it wasn't what Jackie wanted right now and the guilt of that, of aching for someone else, fucking killed her.

So Jackie tried to pretend she didn't want Shauna's body under hers—that she didn't wish Van had dragged her into her lap instead of inviting her, that she didn't wish Van would snake a hand under her top and scratch at her bare skin. That she didn't wish Van would make it a little easier to pretend she was Shauna.

"Wanna talk about it?" Van asked gently, lips so close they caught on the shell of Jackie's ear.

"No," Jackie hiccuped, "same shit as always. Just… no."

"Okay," Van whispered, a little hesitant, but unwilling to push.

Jackie pulled back to look at her, hands clasped together behind her neck, fingers tangling through her long hair and trapping strands in her grasp. She studied her freckles, eyes roaming over the bridge of her nose, before kissing her to quiet her mind.

Van was quick to oblige, parting her lips for Jackie. Her tongue moved, slow and precise, like she was searching for the answers that Jackie wouldn't give her. Jackie tried to deepen the kiss—tried to make it sloppier, to get them to that messy place they sometimes went to, where they were all spit and heavy breathing and shared desperation to just fucking forget everything that'd ever happened to them, to wipe Tai and Shauna away for a few precious hours—but Van was stubborn and persistent and Jackie missed the window where she could turn this into something else and fell back into great, painful sobs.

Van moved like she'd been waiting for this. She broke the kiss and coaxed Jackie's head into the crook of her neck before maneuvering them to the edge of the bed. Without losing her hold on Jackie, she stood and headed for the bathroom. Jackie clung tight to her, but she knew Van wouldn't drop her. They'd done this before.

Van perched herself on the edge of the tub, her back to the faucet, and Jackie let her legs unwrap from their spot above Van's hips. She set her feet flat on the floor of the tub and pressed her forehead to Van's jaw, just below her ear. Van pushed her sleeves up and reached back without disturbing Jackie, twisting the water on and flipping the drain closed. The water was cold when it first washed over Jackie's feet and she shivered, Van running her hands soothingly up and down her sides. It warmed quickly, hot water filling the basin, and when it reached the bottom of Jackie's calves, she stood, swinging one leg around Van's body, gripping her shoulder for balance.

She underdressed, steam filling the air around her, Van's hand out for her to stabilize herself—palm up, forearm tensed to bear Jackie's weight as she raised each leg high enough to step out of her shorts without letting them hit the water. Van got the bubble bath out from under the sink as Jackie pulled her tank top over her head. Van took it from her and set it on the counter with her shorts before dumping the liquid under the tap—the one Jackie picked because it smelled like Van's shampoo.

The rich scent of lavender filled the small room and Van helped Jackie lower herself into the water. Jackie wished the tub was bigger. Deeper . More like the one in Maine at Lottie's fancy new beach house. One that Van would get into with her. But it wasn't. And Van was sitting on the edge of the tub again, still clothed, twisting the water off.

Jackie's body had stilled, her cries quieted to small gasping whines. Van leaned down, lips finding her temple. Jackie reached for her without thinking about her wet hands or the suds clinging to her arms. She flinched when she realized she'd gotten Van's hair and the collar of her shirt wet.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," she sniffled, drawing her hands away quickly.

Van caught her arms and guided them back up, encouraging Jackie to settle them behind her neck again.

"Don't be, Jack."

Jackie nodded, pulling Van back down, tilting her chin up. Van kissed her and when she sat up, Jackie released her. They sat quietly for a moment, Van massaging Jackie's scalp, until Van broke the silence.

"You didn't eat enough today, honey," she said softly. "They're worse when you're hungry."

Jackie sighed and let her hands float up, making craters in the thick layer of bubbles at the surface of the water.

"Ice cream?" Van suggested.

Jackie swallowed hard and nodded. Van wasn't going to let her go back to sleep without eating and if Jackie didn't sleep, Van wouldn't sleep. The idea of eating anything right now made Jackie's stomach twist, her insides knotted and tight, but she could do it for her.

Van smoothed Jackie's hair back as she stood.

"Be right back," she promised.

Jackie watched her walk away—one hand skimming the walls as she made her way to the fridge. Van refused to admit that she had trouble seeing at night, muttering about Jackie's headache triggers and how she didn't need to turn the overhead lights on to get around anyway, thank you very much.

When Van was around the corner and out of Jackie's view, she submerged herself fully, head dipping below the water. Jackie wanted to drown the desire that was choking her, the little voice in her head that wouldn't stop screaming for Shauna. She wanted to baptize herself, free herself, allow herself to love Van wholly and purely and without the weight of the women of their pasts building a wall between them. She wanted to love Van the way Van deserved to be loved.

But as Jackie rose up, water clinging to her lashes and hair sticking to her cheeks, she couldn't help but wonder what Shauna would look like on her wedding day.

PRESENT

Shauna's dress was dated—thick lace, suffocating her frame. She was standing in front of the room with Jeff, his eyes locked on her body, hers on his face, their hands intertwined—four hands clasped between them, melting into one messy tangle. The venue was small and dark, nothing like the one Jackie had seen in photos, and the guests were wrong. All wrong.

Laura Lee and Lottie sat arm in arm on the floor. There were no chairs, just a scuffed wooden surface and girls sitting cross-legged. Lottie looked solid, like Jackie could run fingers through her waves and feel them stick under her nails, but Laura Lee was hazy. She was there and not—soft around the edges and cast into a shadow that wasn't hitting Lottie.

Van looked older than the others. Shauna and Jeff were in their twenties, exactly as they should be for this. Laura Lee and Lottie were teens, youthful cheeks and scraped knees under sundresses. But Van was Jackie's Van. Present Van, her hair slightly faded with age—not graying or whitening, but lightening to a sweet summer red—frown lines between her eyes, bundled up in her army green Carhartt.

Jackie could only make out the back of the other girl's heads, huddled together as if for warmth in the periphery. Except Taissa.

Taissa was nearest to Shauna, the only other person dressed appropriately for a wedding. Shauna and Jeff's age—dress a dated bronze, satin with thin straps. She was a bridesmaid, but not. Shauna's attendant, but not. No flowers, no standing at her side—just sitting up on her knees at Shauna's feet, solemn, looking directly at Jackie.

Jackie looked down. Varsity jacket, striped tee. Dirty hands, brown and red buried under too-long nails. Young hands, no freckles, skin taught and plump, even if the bones were far too prominent.

"Are you going to make a scene, Jackie?"

Shauna's voice, her head turned toward Jackie's, her hair in a low, messy ponytail. Too thin, suddenly, except her stomach which was round, protruding. Pregnant.

"I—I—" Jackie stuttered, stepping backwards too quickly, tripping over her own feet.

"Of course you're making this about you," Shauna spat. "You're so obsessed with yourself, I'm surprised you're even aware other people exist."

"Shauna, please," Jackie cried, tears flooding her eyes, making her vision blurrier, letting the rest of the girls drift out of focus. "Please, I'm sorry. I'll go. I'll—"

"No. You don't get to ruin everything and then walk away."

Shauna dropped Jeff's hands and he faded into the background, his body mixing with the shadow, becoming nothing, but Jackie could feel him there, watching.

"You just get everything you want all the time, like it's nothing."

Shauna was taking steps towards her—gliding more than walking, feet hidden by her floor-length gown. Dirt spread up its hem as she walked, as though she were wading through mud.

“I’m sorry,” Jackie sobbed, clutching her chest.

She tried to look away from Shauna’s glare, but she couldn’t. She tried to step back, but her feet were stuck in place. The closer Shauna got, the more distorted her face became—red and screwed up with anger, flickering like it was lit only by a half-flame candle.

“I should go,” Jackie repeated, begging. “I should go. I don’t wanna fight. Please, let me go!”

“Jackie,” Tai said from her spot on the floor, “don’t go. It isn’t safe.”

“Soon the whole world is going to know exactly who you are,” Shauna was only a foot away now, white dress replaced with dark flannel and dirty jeans, her face young and sweet and in focus. Jackie wanted to reach for her, pull her close and coax her out of this. She knew it wouldn’t work. She covered her mouth with trembling hands instead. “And they’ll know exactly how tragic and boring and insecure you really are.”

Jackie squeezed her eyes shut and suddenly it was freezing. Too cold, scary cold.

“Jackie,” Shauna said gently.

Jackie’s eyes snapped open as Shauna’s hand grazed her shoulder. Shauna was older. She looked right, like maybe Jackie was waking up because the rest of that shit was a dream. She knew it was a dream. It had to be a dream.

But they were outside and it was too cold and snow was collecting at their feet.

“Shauna?” Jackie croaked, blinking up at her from where she sat, perched on a log, pants growing damp and sticking to her thighs.

“Hey,” Shauna smiled, “this is stupid. I’m sorry.”

Jackie cried, words dying in her throat. Shauna crouched next to her.

“Come inside please,” Shauna tucked her hair behind her ear, and Jackie leaned into her touch.

One quick blink, and they were in the living room at The Manor, Jackie on the blue velvet couch, Shauna with an arm around her shoulders. Tai and Van sat on the opposite couch, hand-in-hand. Nat and Misty were on the floor in front of the fire, clutching mugs, the steam wafting up and swirling in front of their smiling faces.

“Baby,” Jackie choked out, her throat stinging, “I’m so tired. Please, can we go back to bed? I… I don’t feel right. I feel—”

“Shhhh,” Shauna murmured, lips against Jackie’s temple, pulling her closer.

“Here,” Lottie was in front of Jackie, passing her a mug. “Try this.”

Jackie shivered, clutching the warm ceramic between blue fingers. She took a tentative sip, spitting the liquid out the second it hit her tongue.

“Hot chocolate,” she sobbed, tossing it away from her. She watched the muddy brown liquid spread across the hardwood, the mug teetering back and forth before coming to a stop on its side.

Everyone looked at her, confusion etched on their faces.

“Jack?” Van asked gently, “Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry,” Jackie whimpered, “I’m sorry. I can’t… I can’t… I’m just—”

“It’s fine, Jax,” Shauna assured her, looping her arms around Jackie so that she had her whole body in her grip, “It’s all gonna be fine.”

Shauna pulled Jackie into her lap, one arm hooked under her knees, the other supporting her back. Jackie buried her face in Shauna’s chest and cried harder.

“I love you, Jackie. You know that, right?”

Jackie gasped, pulled into consciousness by Shauna’s insistent hands. She was rubbing her back firmly, Jackie’s sleep shirt bunched up around her waist so that Shauna’s fingers could brush bare skin. Shauna’s other hand dug into Jackie’s thigh, securing her in her lap. Jackie’s cheeks were wet and her eyes stung. She was sitting exactly how she had at the end of her dream and please, God, let this be real. Let me be awake now.

“Jax,” Shauna soothed, rocking her side to side just slightly. “Jackie, it’s okay. You’re okay.”

She pulled back to look at Shauna’s face. The lamp was still on, the amber glow painting Shauna’s pink cheeks redder. Jackie took them between her hands. Wet with tears, like Jackie’s own. Warm and full. This was Shauna. This was real.

“I—I—” Jackie sputtered, searching Shauna’s face. Her eyes were round with worry, her lips pressed into a sympathetic frown. “Just had a—a n-nightmare.”

Jackie tried to comfort Shauna, but the words came out wrong. Choppy and tight. Pathetic. Her shoulders shook with a fresh wave of sobs.

“I know,” Shauna murmured, drawing Jackie flush against her chest. “I could… I heard you talking some. I know. I’m so sorry, baby. I’m sorry.”

Oh, fuck. Shit, shit, shit.

Jackie tensed, muscles frozen with fear and embarrassment, mind cloudy and spinning, searching for what Shauna might’ve heard.

“No, no,” Shauna mumbled, pressing kisses along Jackie’s sweaty hairline, “nothing… nothing to worry about. Nothing to worry about. I promise.”

Shauna swayed Jackie gently, bringing her impossibly close. Jackie would’ve felt suffocated, normally. Overwhelmed by the tight hold. Would’ve squirmed against it. She’d been through this with more women than she cared to admit, all of them reacting differently, most of them wounded by Jackie’s reluctant response to their consolation.

But Shauna was different. Shauna had lifted Jackie into her lap before she was even awake, reached up under her clothes to soothe bare skin, pressed their bodies together until there was no space between them, and Jackie still wished she could be closer.

Jackie automatically snaked one arm behind Shauna’s neck, twisting to press her chest against Shauna instead of her shoulder, her other hand slipping under the top of Shauna’s

shirt, digging in above her collarbone like she was trying to pry it loose and hold it between her fingers. Shauna winced and Jackie slackened her grip.

“Sorry,” she cried into Shauna’s chest, body shaking with renewed vigor, “sorry. I’m sorry.”

Shauna shook her head. Jackie felt her chin twist against her skull.

“Oh, Jackie,” Shauna murmured, like her name alone was a prayer, something that held power. “Jackie, Jackie, Jackie.”

Jackie didn’t know how much time passed like that—Shauna lulling her to relaxation, sweet words and solid touches, until Jackie was pliable and docile in her arms.

“It’s…” Jackie said hoarsely. She cleared her throat and tried again, “I have that dream a lot. This time was different, but…”

Shauna tangled a hand in Jackie’s hair, massaging the base of her skull gently.

“You don’t have to tell me, if… you don’t want to.”

“I know,” Jackie’s lips brushed against the base of Shauna’s neck and she felt her shiver under her. “I just… you heard me and I… what did I say?”

“My… my name,” Shauna answered carefully, sinking back against the pillows, Jackie clinging to her as if she may shove her away. Shauna kept her hands moving, one against Jackie’s back, the other hidden in her hair.

“You said my name and—” Shauna took a breath so deep Jackie’s torso rose with it, “—and you said you didn’t wanna fight. You kept saying you’d… go.”

“The fight,” Jackie’s voice cracked. She drew triangles against Shauna’s skin. “It’s always… that fight. Different versions, but… y’know.”

“Me too,” Shauna sighed, a catch in her throat.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

They shifted, moving in tandem as if they’d planned it, Shauna laying on her back and Jackie curled into her side, leg slotted between Shauna’s, arm draped across her ribcage. Shauna still had a hand under Jackie’s shirt, digging her thumb into the muscles around her spine.

“I was hoping it’d go away,” Jackie admitted quietly. “With you back. With us sort of… finishing the fight, like we did.”

“It still might,” Shauna offered gently. “Maybe with time. Hasn’t been long.”

“Yeah. It just… it morphed,” Jackie nuzzled closer, cheek sliding against Shauna’s breastbone over her threadbare tee. “The old shit and… new stuff.”

Shauna’s free hand gripped the back of her thigh, thumb skating back and forth, and Jackie felt the tears spilling again, dampening the bright red fabric of Shauna’s shirt and staining it a deeper, bloodier shade.

“The fucking… fucking snow and… and God, the stupid fucking hot chocolate,” Jackie gave a small, watery chuckle. “It’s the dumbest fucking thing, you wouldn’t believe—”

Shauna’s hands stilled. She hissed in air, gulping it down. Her chest went rigid. Jackie propped herself up on her elbow, peering down at her. Shauna’s face was pained—jaw clenched, lips pursed, eyes narrowed. She took loud, shallow breaths through her nose.

“Hey,” Jackie pushed Shauna’s hair away from her forehead, slid her hand down to cup her jaw. “What’s wrong? What happened, baby?”

“You… did you just say…”

Shauna scrunched her face, eyes shut tight. Jackie kissed her cheek, high on the apple of it, just below her left eye. When Jackie pulled away, Shauna was staring at her again, looking at her like she had that very first night—Jackie in bed at the shitty motel, waiting for Shauna to join her. Shauna spending a full two minutes—Jackie counted the seconds silently before interrupting her—standing, frozen, taking Jackie in.

“Shauna, what—” Jackie started, falling quiet when Shauna dragged two fingers across her lower lip.

Jackie cocked her head, but didn’t pull back, letting Shauna’s touch linger.

Shauna shook her head quickly and traced Jackie’s jaw before letting her hand come to rest under Jackie’s chin.

“Are you real?” she asked, voice barely above a whisper—all breath and wonder. Jackie opened her mouth to answer, but Shauna wasn’t finished. “I mean… really real? Am I… I’m pretty sure you are but… if I’m making this up somehow please just… fucking tell me.”

Jackie’s heart sank—a freefall from its usual home, high behind her ribs, to the pit of her stomach.

“I’m real,” she said firmly, struggling to keep the shakiness out of her words. “I’m really real. I promise.”

Shauna nodded, tugging down on her chin gently. Jackie followed her unspoken instruction, bending to kiss her. She took Shauna’s lead and Shauna kept it light—lips moving slowly, resting against each other while they breathed more than anything else. Shauna pushed up gently on Jackie’s shoulders until she drew away.

“You said hot chocolate,” Shauna said decisively, as if she were answering a question.

“I—yeah, I did. There’s this dream I started having when—”

“I know,” Shauna whispered, gazing at Jackie in awe. “I—”

She tucked a lock of hair behind Jackie’s ear and Jackie sucked in a sharp breath. Normal. That was a normal thing for Shauna to do. But… something about it was too close to the way Shauna touched Jackie in her stupid, fucking death dream.

“I think I was there, Jax,” Shauna said quickly, as if spitting the words out before they could burn her tongue.

“There?” Jackie asked. “What do you mean there? Like… when I dreamt it? Like just now?”

Shauna shook her head slowly. Jackie didn’t realize she was wobbling until she felt Shauna stabilize her—hands sliding down to grip her waist. Her weight felt heavy where it rested in her forearm. She shifted slightly.

“No… I mean I—I come get you. And I bring you inside.”

Tears slid sideways from the corners of Shauna’s eyes, twin droplets running down her temples and escaping into her hair. Jackie held her breath.

“And I sit you in front of the fire,” Jackie watched her own tears land on Shauna’s cheek, wiped them away with a trembling finger, “and L-Lottie brings you… hot chocolate.”

Jackie sobbed once—a controlled release, letting steam out of the valve so she didn’t burst.

“Is… is that your dream?” Shauna whispered.

“Yeah, it is.”

Jackie cried and it was almost a laugh, too many emotions coursing through her for her body to process them individually. She laid back down, elbow finally giving out, face finding the crook of Shauna’s neck. Shauna wrapped her arms tight again, squeezing Jackie unbelievably close. Jackie felt her back crack under the pressure, some tension easing out with it.

Shauna broke the silence eventually, when their tears had run dry and she’d loosened her hold on Jackie.

“Is this even possible?”

“It must be,” Jackie said, tone calm and measured, “if it happened.”

“Yeah, but is it… you know…” Shauna adjusted herself, craning her neck back. Jackie dropped her head on the pillow next to Shauna to meet her eyes.

“Supernatural?” Jackie offered, lips twitching up on one side, forming the ghost of a smile for half a second.

Fuck if I know. Fuck if anyone knows.

Shauna blushed and Jackie reached out, impulsively grazing the bridge of her nose, feeling for the heat of it.

“Yeah,” Shauna shrugged.

“I dunno,” Jackie answered honestly, “but I just… I don’t really know if it matters. It is what it is, right?”

Shauna pressed her lips to Jackie’s forehead, lingering there as she spoke.

“It seems like you do think it matters.”

Another kiss before pulling back. Cushioning the blow.

Jackie watched Shauna worry her lip. She'd never nailed down exactly how much she believed. She truly hadn't thought it mattered what was real and what was just… some psychological phenomenon. Not anymore. Not when they had roofs over their heads and 24/7 grocery stores and well-lit city streets and fucking… cell phones and GPS. They weren't in the fucking woods anymore.

She'd known bits and pieces of the truth—she remembered the blood and the pain and the reports of people getting better thanks to her. She'd believed it then, as much as anything else. Nothing made sense out there.

But then Jackie had come home. Her scars had healed, nothing but faint lines, slightly paler than the rest of her skin—except for the scar, the one Shauna was tracing absentmindedly.

Jackie distanced herself from those memories, shutting everything out, locking that part of her away. She couldn't be angry that Van hadn't told her the whole story—Jackie had all but demanded she leave her in the dark. It was easier to ignore it than face what it meant—the cards and the roles and the mess of it all. A structure to the chaos, a hierarchy in the tragedy.

It was so much easier to bury it—to worry about Shauna instead. To lose herself in Shauna—watching her hands skim the water as they soaked together, long fingers brushing ripples into the surface, feeling Shauna's breath, hot against her neck and chest and lips, listening to Shauna make promises she prayed she could keep.

Denial.

Jackie Taylor, with her head in the clouds. Seeing good where there was none, ignoring the hard stuff, smiling through it.

But what exactly, Jackie wondered, was so fucking wrong with that?

She wanted to live in the moment. She wasn't like Shauna—she didn't play the past on repeat.

(Maybe she did, just a little. In the quiet, dark hours—one or two in the morning, when she'd listen to her tape and cling to Shauna's voice and remember how it felt to be in her arms or on her lap or—)

"Are you too tired for this right now?" Shauna had rolled to face Jackie without her noticing.

"I was thinking," Jackie answered, hand finding the cushion of Shauna's hip, clinging to it.

"Hmm," Shauna smiled gently, "always the thinking with you."

Jackie grinned and tousled Shauna's hair until she laughed and moved out of Jackie's reach.

"We can go back to sleep," Shauna offered. "Talk in the morning."

Jackie could tell that wasn't what she wanted. She played with the hem of Jackie's shirt, no drowsiness in her tone or her anxious movements.

“No, it’s okay. I think that…” Jackie pried Shauna’s fingers loose, taking them between her own, “I think that intuition exists.”

Shauna frowned—not disagreement. Curiosity.

“Like… I think that women can sense things and—fuck, I don’t know. This is so beyond what I can even put into words, babe.”

“Try?” Shauna asked, earnest eyes and slightly parted lips and slow blinks, an expression that made Jackie want to give her the whole world.

Jackie didn’t have the whole world. She had scrambled, two a.m. ramblings that she couldn’t even lock into coherent thoughts. But it was Shauna.

Shauna, who’d nodded along kindly as she listened to Jackie try to explain why she liked Jeff when they were fourteen, the two of them laying shoulder to shoulder on the floor with their feet propped up on her bed. Shauna, who’d held Jackie’s hand when the words hadn’t come out right and she’d huffed in frustration. Shauna, who’d told her it was okay to feel all sorts of things at once, but that maybe when the other girls asked for a full report on their first date, Jackie should just stick to he’s cute.

So Jackie tried for her.

“I think nobody knows. I think… it’s like asking someone to tell you if God is real.”

“Lots of people think God is real,” Shauna said, dropping Jackie’s hand in favor of stroking her hair slowly.

“Well, do you?” Jackie asked with a small smile, knowing the answer before Shauna gave it.

“Sometimes,” Shauna shrugged.

“Yeah,” Jackie sighed, “sometimes. That’s exactly it. It’s like… okay, Lottie’s like a true believer. When she’s herself, that is.”

Shauna grimaced at the mention of her name.

“She’s like your step-dad. Fuck, is your mom even married to Dave still?”

“Twenty-eight years and counting, and I still have no fucking clue what she sees in that man.”

Jackie chuckled. He was fine, for a man anyway, but Shauna had met him at twelve—her and Jackie catching him as he tried to sneak out of the house early one Saturday morning—and that was a first impression there was no coming back from.

“Good for them,” Jackie grinned. Shauna rolled her eyes. “Anyway, Lottie’s like Dave. Service every week. Devout. A true believer.”

“We’re going full metaphor, huh?” Shauna teased, tone light, cheek squished up against her pillow.

Jackie felt so fucking at home. A topic she’d dreaded even thinking about, and Shauna made it feel comfortable—like they could delve into anything. Like sixteen again—pulling an

all-nighter, high as hell and wondering aloud about everything and nothing.

“Full metaphor,” Jackie agreed. “Van is more like your mom. She goes to synagogue sometimes, but she believes it most of the time.”

“Deborah goes to shul every fucking week, now,” Shauna said conspiratorially, like she was divulging gossip she shouldn’t.

“What? No fucking way,” Jackie laughed. “Dave?”

“No,” Shauna groaned. “Worse. Danny became a goddamn rabbi. Ten years ago. Suddenly he’s the golden child and mom’s at every Friday service, sometimes Saturday, too.”

“Holy shit,” Jackie mused. “I didn’t expect that one.”

“Neither did I. He’s a dumbass.”

“Shauna,” Jackie giggled, poking her in the side. “I’m sure he got smarter.”

“Barely,” Shauna smirked.

“Okay, well… Van is like your mom before barely-smarter Danny became a rabbi,” Jackie explained, running her fingers up and down Shauna’s side. “It’s like, this stuff is real to her at her baseline, but she doesn’t see it in everything. She isn’t constantly thinking about it. Does that make sense?”

“Actually, yeah. I’m just waiting for where you come in.”

“I’m like you. Or… at least how you used to be.”

Jackie crinkled her nose at the thought of Shauna changing so much, going through the growing pains of life without Jackie there to witness them.

“I think it could be… witchy shit. But… I think other things could explain it, too. Like when you thought the Catholics might be onto something for half a second.”

“You know I just wanted to torture my mom with that shit,” Shauna laughed.

“Yeah, but you get what I mean. I’ve believed all sorts of things, but I’ve never thought I needed to decide which was right. Maybe it is fucking mystical.”

Shauna’s hand left Jackie’s hair and found her chest, fingers landing on the inch of her scar that was exposed, as if drawn there.

“Maybe women’s intuition will be explained scientifically some day. Or maybe we’re like, victims of really persistent mass hysteria.”

“Yeah,” Shauna said simply, tone neutral, like this was all some thought experiment. Something they could talk about in hypotheticals, safe and comfortable in their own bed. Something distant. “That’s how I feel, too.”

Jackie did think there was more. She felt… bound to Shauna. She’d always thought they were connected somehow, closer than people could be without some deeper force pulling strings. The dream made that real to Jackie. It was the tangible evidence she needed, but she wasn’t ready to go there yet. Not tonight. This was enough for tonight.

As if on cue, Jackie's stomach growled loudly.

"You need to eat," Shauna sat up and scooted back toward the head of the bed in one swift motion. "I'll go get you something."

Jackie whined, lunging closer dramatically, pressing the side of her face to Shauna's stomach and clinging to her waist. Shauna laughed quietly and Jackie focused on the thrum of it against her ear. When Jackie hummed her contentment, Shauna indulged her, busy hands roaming her back and arms.

"Jax," she mumbled eventually, fighting a yawn. "Let me get you something to eat real quick."

Jackie let her head fall to Shauna's lap, shaking it against her legs. She couldn't do it. Not right now. Not after… just not right now.

"Okay, well not eating isn't an option. So what do you want?" Shauna prompted, shifting beneath Jackie, her knees turning out. Jackie's chin dropped with the movement, sinking between Shauna's thighs.

"I can think of something I'd like to eat," Jackie murmured without thinking, words muffled as she buried her nose in Shauna's skin.

"What was that?" Shauna's tone told Jackie she'd heard exactly what she'd said.

Jackie tilted her face up toward Shauna, who was raising an amused eyebrow at her, and flashed her best innocent smile, forcing her eyes wider and batting her lashes.

"What food do you wanna eat?" Shauna tried again.

Jackie pulled a face and Shauna suppressed another laugh, tugging twice on a lock of Jackie's hair.

"Leftover pasta?" Shauna suggested, winding Jackie's hair around her pinky.

"Mmm, no," Jackie worried the hem of Shauna's sleepshirt between her finger and her thumb.

"There's more bread and veggies."

"That doesn't sound good," Jackie whined.

This was old routine they were falling into—Shauna offering solutions and Jackie remaining stubbornly indecisive. Jackie settled into it, warmth flooding her chest when Shauna narrowed her eyes and quirked one corner of her mouth—equal parts exasperated and amused.

"Do you want me to make you something else?"

Shauna said it so casually, like this was just how their lives worked. Like they regularly took midnight trips to the kitchen together, Shauna cooking while Jackie watched and waited.

It would be, Jackie thought. It would be how their lives worked and the sweetness of their future and the bitter fucking regrets of their past were sitting heavy in the pit of Jackie's stomach. She blinked back tears.

“You would do that for me?”

“Of course,” Shauna said firmly. “What sounds good?”

“Hmmm… nothing,” Jackie groaned apologetically.

Shauna sighed, shaking her head with a small smile. A moment’s silence passed as she chewed her lip in concentration, but when she broke it her tone was excited and her eyes were lit up.

“I know what you want.”

“Yeah?” Jackie pushed herself up on her elbows quickly and used her grasp on Shauna’s shirt to lift it a few inches, sliding it up until her knuckles brushed the waistband of Shauna’s underwear.

She’d been half kidding before, but she wasn’t going to say no if the opportunity was presenting itself. She was exhausted—there was no fucking way she could let Shauna touch her again right now—but there was no reason she couldn’t have Shauna. Maybe that’s what they both needed. Maybe—

“No,” Shauna laughed, swatting Jackie’s hand away. “not that.”

Jackie’s jaw dropped in exaggerated offense as she jerked back to get a better look at Shauna.

“I mean, yes that. Always that,” Shauna added hastily, still grinning. Jackie twisted her lips, trying to maintain a sour look and curb the giggle bubbling at her lips. “Not right now, though. I meant dessert. We didn’t even touch it and you’ll always eat sweets.”

Oh.

Right.

Apple crisp did sound good. It’d smelled good—clinging to Shauna’s skin—and Shauna was right, sweets did usually do the trick when she was struggling to eat. Van kept a gallon of marionberry ice cream stocked in each of their freezers at all times for moments like this.

“Or… I mean… you used to.”

Jackie had been quiet too long—uncertainty had crept in and Shauna’s smile had faded.

“Still,” Jackie reassured quickly, “still do. You’re right. That sounds great, baby.”

Jackie gripped Shauna’s shoulders to pull herself upright, but halfway up Shauna gasped sharply, her muscles tensing beneath Jackie’s fingers.

Jackie let go and scrambled to her knees.

“Oh my God, Shauna. Fuck, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking, I—”

“Hey, hey,” Shauna soothed through gritted teeth, massaging the place where her injured shoulder met her neck, “why are you apologizing? You didn’t do anything.”

“I literally did,” Jackie insisted, tentatively resting a hand on her thigh. “Are you okay? Do I need to get—”

“If you say Misty, I will absolutely lose my shit.”

“Okay, how about that cream then?” Jackie countered.

She was on her feet and rummaging through their things in seconds. She hadn’t seen it as she unpacked their bags, so she started with Shauna’s purse, digging to the bottom and feeling for it while she eyed Shauna nervously.

“Jackie, I promise I’m okay. Let’s just go downstairs and eat, yeah?”

“No, no, don’t be silly.” Jackie dropped Shauna’s purse and turned around to snatch her own off the window seat. She pushed past sunglasses and the book she’d been using as a work reference and a bottle of painkillers, which she took out before resuming the hunt. “I’m fine. This is way more important. I know it’s somewhere in here, just—”

Jackie found the tube, lifting it up in triumph at the same time Shauna’s hand brushed her lower back. Jackie jumped, startled, and swung around to face her.

“Jax,” Shauna’s tone was serious. Solemn. “Please don’t… don’t make me beg you to eat.”

“Oh,” Jackie breathed, wrapping careful arms around Shauna’s waist and pulling her close. “No. No, I’m not, I just—I’ll eat, okay? Right now.”

“Okay,” Shauna nodded against her before starting towards the door.

“Uh-uh, you’re gonna sit in bed and start putting this on,” Jackie handed her the tube, “and I’ll go get it. And water so you can take that Advil. That’s the deal. You want anything else?”

“No,” Shauna dropped a quick kiss to Jackie’s lips. “That works for me.”

Jackie held her phone out in front of her, the flashlight beaming bright as she made her way down the stairs. The bedroom she assumed Van had chosen for her and Taissa was close to the staircase and the overhead lights would wake her if Jackie switched them on.

She made it down to the bottom, skipping the second to last step to avoid the loud creak it always gave, but dropped her phone with a clatter.

“Shit,” Jackie swore under her breath, her phone skidding across the hardwood, the light illuminating the ceiling as it moved.

She hurried to pick it up, praying she hadn’t woken Van or— God forbid —Tai. She hadn’t needed to worry about that though, because as she stood up she saw the outline of her—Taissa, sitting up on the couch in the pitch darkness, her back to Jackie. She was perched on the edge, unnaturally stiff, but her arm was moving up to her face.

Something felt off to Jackie. There was something tense in the room, the air heavy around them.

Okay.

Okay, it’s okay. She’s probably just been sleepwalking which is totally normal and fine and not at all terrifying even if Shauna acts like it’s the worst thing in the world.

Jackie wondered if she should go back upstairs for Shauna or down the hall for Van, her heart hammering in her chest, but she didn't want to leave Tai alone. Besides, maybe she was wrong. Maybe Tai was sitting in here because she couldn't sleep. Maybe she just liked sitting in the most uncomfortable position possible in total darkness.

Fuck.

Jackie crept slowly toward Tai, making her way around the couch.

"Taissa?" she asked quietly, before she entered her line of sight.

She didn't respond. Jackie moved directly in front of her, keeping a few feet of distance between them. Tai was scrubbing over her eyes with one fist, her other arm raised to block the harsh light.

"Jackie, what're you doing?" Tai mumbled, voice thick and words slurring.

Awake. She's awake. At least… Jackie thought she was. She was definitely dazed, had almost certainly been asleep before Jackie came crashing down.

Fuck, Jackie needed to ask Shauna if she talked during these episodes.

Jackie lowered her flashlight and switched the lamp on. If Van woke at this point, so be it. Tai blinked quickly, eyes trained on Jackie. Confused.

Jackie sat next to her, one leg tucked under her knee so she could face her. She pulled her tee shirt down as far as she could, covering the tops of her thighs, vaguely wishing she'd thought to throw on sweats. Tai turned toward her automatically, some of the bizarre stiffness easing out of her expression.

"Shauna and I woke up and I was hungry," Jackie explained, tone low and soft, "so I just was getting some of that dessert we didn't eat."

Tai nodded. She still looked confused. Her brow was furrowed and she was tilting her head, eyes roaming all over Jackie's face. She seemed… unsettled by her presence.

"I know it's weird, huh?" Jackie tried, taking one of Tai's hands loosely. "Me being around. It… well, sometimes it freaks Shauna out, I think. She'll just sort of stare at me. I don't think she has any idea how long she's doing it for. Nat's had some moments, too."

Jackie seemed to have accomplished something—Taissa curled her own fingers around Jackie's, her dark brown irises shifting into sharper focus. She cleared her throat briskly.

"It's very fucking weird," Tai's lips curved into a gentle half-smile, the lines between her eyes growing shallow as her face relaxed.

She was beautiful and exhausted and so clearly on the brink of something. Jackie squeezed her hand for a second. Tai swallowed and glanced in front of her. Jackie followed her gaze, landing on a closed laptop, balanced precariously, a third of it hanging off the edge of the coffee table.

"You were sleepwalking, right?"

Tai snapped back to stare at Jackie, her mouth opening and shutting a few times. It was enough of an answer in its own right—Taissa without an immediate response, chewing on the

words as if they formed too slowly.

“No,” she shook her head and dropped Jackie’s hand to smooth over the front of her pajamas—the same purple set she’d worn the night before. “I was just… up. I couldn’t sleep. Thought I’d get some work done.”

She gestured weakly at the computer, her face scrunched into the same guilty look Jackie had seen a hundred times in their youth—after Allie broke her leg, after Coach Martinez used her talent to degrade Jackie in front of the team, after telling everyone at the party she had no idea where Van was and since when was she her keeper, anyway?

Shame.

Jackie gave her a knowing look. She watched as Tai stared fixedly at the laptop, waiting for her reaction. It was silent. Taissa pitched forward, catching her head in her hands and her elbows on her knees.

Jackie hesitated. She thought about saying something, but Tai wasn’t arguing. She was wilting. It would break Jackie to call out the lie with Tai hurting like this. Insult to injury.

So Jackie gently placed her hand on the small of Taissa’s back and waited some more. It didn’t take long for her to cave—a few deep breaths that Jackie counted silently, in for four, out for five—and Tai was uncovering her eyes, chin perched in her palms and face turned towards Jackie.

“I just… drank too much. It threw me off. But I’ll be fine. I just need to go back to sleep. I __”

Tai swallowed and Jackie tried to look encouraging. She wracked her brain for any scrap of information she knew about this. Drinking and sleepwalking—that sounded familiar. There were even certain foods that could trigger it, Jackie knew that much. But… this was Tai. Tai’s sleepwalking was… different, wasn’t it?

“Please don’t tell Van. Or Shauna. Van just had that… that fucking panic attack and she needs rest.”

Taissa was begging. Her eyes were round and cloudy, not quite crying but not far from it. Jackie felt Tai’s pain in her own chest, tugging down on her sternum.

“Honey… I’m not sure—” she whispered, rubbing small circles against her back.

“Shauna’s overwhelmed already, Jackie,” Tai interrupted. “I know she’s trying to hide it with you a lot of the time but she’s… I’m worried about her. This is a lot for her. She’s not… she isn’t stable. She didn’t stay gone for long this time but that doesn’t mean she won’t.”

Blood rushed past Jackie’s ears. Her head was pounding suddenly, rhythmic pressure in her temples. Tai clearly didn’t want to alarm Van or Shauna. She could be exaggerating to convince Jackie, but what she was saying felt truthful. Jackie had seen Shauna’s vacant stare. She’d witnessed more than enough of Van’s panic attacks. She knew how much they both loved Taissa.

“And when she hears I’ve been sleepwalking her mind goes to—she thinks about out there. This isn’t that. I got drunk when I shouldn’t have. I’ll go to bed and I’ll be fine.”

Jackie heard Shauna's voice in her head. It's better when she doesn't sleep alone.

Better when she wasn't alone, and Van was right down the hall, and if Taissa felt the way Jackie suspected she did, being with Van was as far from being alone as she could possibly be.

"Okay," Jackie said softly. "We don't have to tell them."

Tai exhaled quickly through her nose, eyes falling closed in relief.

"For now," Jackie amended. "Just… you know, if things get worse I can't—you know what I mean."

Tai nodded.

"But tonight let's just get you back to bed."

Jackie stood, hand extended. Tai looked at it, raised an incredulous brow, and stared up at Jackie.

"I'm a grown woman, I don't need you to escort me to bed." She stood without Jackie's help. "Go get your food."

"Uh, nope," Jackie retorted with a small smile, "this is the deal. I walk you back. Get moving."

"Fine," Tai sighed, "but I'm not holding your fucking hand, Taylor."

Tai brushed past her, heading for the bedroom. She was shaky, a little unsteady on her feet.

"Yeah, I knew I was pushing it with that," Jackie followed a step behind Tai, flashlight angled at the floor in front of her feet.

The door was wide open. Van was curled up on one side of the bed, the covers tossed back on the other. A floorboard squeaked under Tai's foot and Van snapped awake—sitting up and holding one arm out, like she was beckoning someone nearer.

"Just us," Tai said softly.

Van squinted at them, head cocked to the side. Her vision was truly dismal in the dark like this, but Jackie thought she and Tai were two of the few people Van could make out in any conditions.

"Jack?" Van asked groggily. "You okay?"

Tai sat on the edge of the bed, swinging her legs up in front of her in one smooth motion. Van automatically rested a hand on her thigh.

"I'm okay," Jackie whispered.

"So what's going on—Where's my—" Van patted the bed around her frantically, before reaching for the nightstand, fingers closing around her phone.

Tai was watching Van carefully, frowning just slightly.

"No, no, everything's fine," Jackie assured Van quickly, "there's nothing wrong."

Jackie sat at the foot of their bed, giving Van's shin a little squeeze through the comforter.

"I wasn't coming to wake you, angel. I was getting something to eat and I—"

"Instead she got to hear me puking," Tai interrupted swiftly. "Too much wine."

She looked at Van with the same guilty look she'd given Jackie, but Van seemed to accept her story with only a hint of hesitation in this half-asleep state. She rubbed Tai's shoulder slowly.

"I'm sorry, again, Jackie," Tai mumbled while averting her eyes, a pitch-perfect imitation of hungover embarrassment.

Van flashed Tai a sympathetic look and slid her hand to her opposite shoulder, pulling her gently into her side.

"It's okay, hon," Jackie said, "you cleaned me up earlier. It's all good."

"You're feeling better?" Van asked, yawning before placing a kiss to the crown of Tai's head.

"Yeah," Tai nodded, "much."

"Good," Van kissed her again. "Thanks, Jack."

"Of course," Jackie said brightly, standing to head for the door. "I should get back to bed. Goodnight, you two."

She wanted out of there. She hated lying to Van. Her skin felt itchy, too hot. Besides, the point was to get Tai as much sleep as possible, so that they could get her out of this tenuous space.

"Hey," Van called out, "make sure you get that snack."

Tai was already on her side, facing away from Van, hiding her face in her pillow. Van sank down to hold her from behind, but her eyes remained fixed on Jackie.

"I will," Jackie smiled. "Promise."

Van nodded sleepily, pressing her chest to Taissa's back.

"Love you," she yawned, relaxing into the bed. "Goodnight."

"Love you," Jackie echoed quietly.

"Night, Jackie," Tai murmured, wiggling to get comfortable. She met Jackie's gaze with that look again—guilty, and grateful.

"Goodnight."

Need washed over Jackie as she reached the door—primal and sharp—the desire to preserve this. Van sleepy but attentive, pulling Tai closer, an arm wrapped around her waist, fingers gripping her top. Taissa accepting the embrace, pulling the comforter up around them, bringing it tight under her chin and shutting her eyes, tension dissipating with every breath.

Shauna waiting upstairs for Jackie—laying in their bed. Jackie able to touch her whenever she wanted, however she wanted. Shauna, all open and assertive and affectionate.

She took one last look at them, only their heads peeking out, Taissa lower on her pillow, lashes long on her cheek, head tucked under Van's chin.

This wasn't going away. Jackie wouldn't let this go away.

Jackie had checked the busted window—Misty and Nat had done a surprisingly decent job patching it up. She had no idea where they'd found fucking plywood, but she chalked it up to being a Misty thing. She was making her way down the hall opposite Van and Tai's room to make sure the large picture window at the end of it was latched tight when she heard it.

A muffled cry from behind a closed door. Jackie paused and listened—gasping breaths, quiet sobs.

Natalie.

Fuck.

Jackie sent a quick text to Shauna—Checking on Nat real quick, will be up soon. Don't worry xx—and knocked gently on the door.

The cries stopped and blankets rustled.

"Natalie?" Jackie's hand was still raised, hovering near the doorknob. She was going in no matter what. She'd use the master key that hung on the door of the pantry if she had to, she wasn't leaving her to cry alone after she took a fucking rifle to herself last week, but she'd much rather Nat invite her in. "It's me… can I come in?"

A loud sniffle and an exasperated exhale.

"It's open."

Nat's voice was strained, her words slurred. Jackie pushed the door open slowly, peering around it to get an idea of what she was walking into.

Nat hadn't washed her makeup off—black rimmed her eyes and trailed down her cheeks. There were gaps in it, finger marks where she'd smudged it as she tried to wipe it away. She was still in her clothes, a worn band tee and black jeans that clung to her thin frame, and she was laying with her head toward the foot of the bed, her legs extended straight up against the wall. She looked at Jackie upside down, the top of her head digging into the mattress and her chin tilting into the air.

Her right arm hung off the bed, fingers absently grazing the neck of an empty bottle of chardonnay that sat abandoned on the Persian rug. There was a nearly-empty roll of toilet paper next to her left hip and used tissues littered the nightstand and the floor.

"I'll never get used to seeing you walk through the fucking door," Nat rasped. "Like looking at a goddamn dream."

Jackie stepped inside, shutting the door behind her.

"I don't think you're the only one who feels that way."

“Mmm, bet not,” Nat agreed, relaxing into the bed again, her face obscured by a tangle of dark brown hair. One-dimensional—a box-dye job, one Jackie had given herself in gas station bathrooms and airport hotels.

Jackie walked around to the other side of the bed and slipped in, mirroring Nat’s position, their feet next to each other against the light green wall. She looked at Nat, cheek resting on the thick blanket, and Nat did the same, one brow arched.

“Are you okay, Natalie?” Jackie tried to keep her tone casual. Tried to sound more like hey, what’s going on than are you going to off yourself?

Nat chuckled, but the laughter in it was overpowered by the thick, painful sound in her throat.

“I’m not gonna kill myself, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Well.

“Happy to hear that,” Jackie gave her a small, sad smile, “but I’m asking about more than just that, y’know.”

“Yeah,” Nat sighed, shifting her gaze back to the ceiling, “I know.”

She smelled like alcohol and cigarettes and heady, earthy perfume. Jackie traced one of the black lines on her cheek with her eyes, following it all the way to her earlobe, and she waited. Waited like she had with Shauna last night, like she had with Taissa moments ago. Sometimes silence was what they needed—these beautiful, tortured, stubborn women who hated communicating their fucking feelings more than just about anything else.

A fresh tear followed the path of the black streak. Natalie’s lower lip twitched. She threw her arm over her face, burying her eyes behind her elbow, just in time to hide the sobs that wracked through her. Jackie wanted to hold her. She wished she could wrap her up and squeeze her tight, but this was Nat. There was no fucking way she wouldn’t get shoved off the bed.

“I just liked knowing he was out there somewhere,” Nat said suddenly. “He was a fucking… asshole—” she choked on the word, “but he was… just fucking there, y’know?”

Nat’s hand laid flat on the bed between them. Jackie brushed it with her own and, when Nat didn’t flinch away, she wrapped her fingers around Nat’s.

“Yeah,” Jackie whispered, “I know what you mean.”

“And Lottie is just… God,” Nat laughed, something close to a bark, “fucking crazy Lottie. I had them, though. And now he’s dead and she’s out of her goddamn mind and Tai is… Tai. She’s always fucking… busy working or… or cutting her dog’s fucking head off and I—”

Nat’s whole body shook with effort as she took a slow, controlled inhale.

“He was the last one I was connected to and he’s dead and maybe I’m a selfish cunt but it just… fucking sucks.”

Natalie uncovered her face, snatching her hand out from under Jackie’s to tear off a wad of toilet paper. She blew her nose roughly and tossed it aside. They looked at each other again,

Jackie's eyes glassy with sympathy.

"I'll be connected to you," Jackie said quickly. "I know it isn't the same. But… I'll be connected to you. I want to be, I mean. I'm… I care about you, Natalie. So much."

I love you, Jackie finished in her head. I love you and I missed you and I understand you and I'm so fucking sorry I wasn't there for you.

Nat blinked at her a few times.

"God, you're a lot," she said, lips pursed to hide a grin.

"I know," Jackie smiled.

Close enough. This was close enough to reluctant acceptance for now. Jackie would take it.

"What're you doing up, anyway?" Nat asked, running a flat palm roughly over her cheek.

"Nightmare," Jackie answered, giving Nat the information she'd withheld from Tai and Van, offering her some vulnerability. "Shauna woke me up because I was… loud, I think. Talking and crying. Came down for something to eat."

Nat nodded silently, giving Jackie a once-over.

"You're in Shauna's shirt and no fucking pants," she smirked, rolling her eyes. "It's really like we're living out what our twenties would've been."

Nat didn't have to specify—Jackie knew exactly what she meant. All of them together, packed into cars and hotel rooms and vacation homes, drinking and laughing and arguing and fucking. If you stripped it down, took out the murder and the mess of it all, it was what they would've been. No crash. Or maybe… maybe post-crash. Post-crash, if they got rescued before everything went to absolute shit. Trauma bonded. Connected. Them against the world.

"Yeah," Jackie sighed. "Do you think we would've been friends?"

Nat looked guarded—she hit Jackie with that suspicious look, the one that said she felt like something was expected of her. Too much at once. Jackie opened her mouth to smooth it over, but Nat's expression softened. Her eyes went soft and hazy. She looked heavy with booze, suddenly, like she'd stopped pretending to be more sober than she was.

"Yeah. I think so."

Jackie chewed her lip.

"I'm sorry. For… I'm sorry for hurting you. For being a… well, a total fucking bitch to you, really. Back then. It wasn't fair."

Nat snorted and shook her head.

"That water is so far under the fucking bridge, Jackie," Nat scrubbed a hand over her face and let her arm fall above her head. "Stupid fucking kid shit. I wasn't exactly an angel. But thanks."

"I think you kind of were," Jackie shrugged, "all things considered."

Nat shook her foot back and forth quickly, black nail polish showing through a worn spot in the blue wool of her sock, her pinky toe hitting the wall and rebounding steadily.

“You think that about everybody. You’re in love with fucking Shauna.”

“That doesn’t mean I think she’s an angel,” Jackie laughed, “trust me.”

Three quiet knocks. Jackie and Nat both tilted their chins up, eyes on the door, like Nat had when Jackie first came in.

“Yeah?” Nat called.

Shauna pushed the door open and stepped inside, a tray in one hand. Unlike Jackie, she’d actually thought to put pajama bottoms on. She hovered in the doorway for a moment.

“And if you’re like a fucking dream walking in,” Nat grumbled to Jackie, “this one’s a nightmare.”

“Natalie,” Jackie snapped, slapping her shoulder gently before sitting up and turning around.

“A nightmare that cooked your ungrateful ass dinner,” Shauna sat down on the bed in front of Jackie and Nat swung herself up to face them, “and brought you dessert in bed.”

She set the tray between them, three forks laying on the edge.

“Alright,” Nat said, picking up a fork and tearing away a particularly large slice of apple, “you can stay. But only until this is gone.”

“Wow, so generous of you.”

Shauna handed Jackie a fork purposefully, without breaking eye contact with Nat. She was trying not to draw attention to it—to deal in subtleties and keep Jackie’s confidence. Shauna had always been good at that.

Jackie took steady bites, timing them with Natalie’s and Shauna’s, lifting her fork as one of them did, chewing with them, swallowing it down in tandem—something she learned to do with Van years ago.

Jackie mostly listened, chiming in only occasionally, while they each made snide comments and biting jokes at the other’s expense. As Shauna and Nat pretended not to care about each other, the mood in the room lifted. It felt safe. It felt like home, watching them spar lazily with their forks, like they were fighting over a particularly sweet bite, when really Jackie knew they were stalling, making sure to leave more food for her.

When they were finished, Nat waved off Jackie’s foolhardy offer—one that Shauna didn’t protest, one she went momentarily quiet and supportive and serious for—to have her come sleep in the large bed upstairs with them.

Jackie checked that window she’d come down the hall for in the first place, dumped the empty tray on the small table by the foot of the stairs, absolutely barring Shauna from taking it to the kitchen real quick, and led her back to bed.

“I’m just saying,” Shauna scraped finely diced garlic and onion off the chopping board and into the butter melting at the bottom of the pan, “that you have all this fancy shit in this kitchen that none of you use. The set this pan is from probably cost more than my fucking car.”

“You can have it,” Lottie shrugged. She sat at the island, hunched over her coffee with a blanket loosely draped around her shoulders. “Take it with you. If we ever get the fuck out of here, that is.”

Jackie and Van glanced at each other, wide-eyed. They sat on the couch, observing the kitchen from a distance. Shauna and Lottie had acted as though nothing had happened between them last night. Not one glare, not one snappy comment, not even awkward silence.

Misty and Tai were next to Lottie, their barstools close together so that they could both peer at Tai’s laptop.

“Nothing yet,” Tai sighed, leaning back and rubbing her neck. “Fancy hotel, bet they don’t want an employee’s on-the-clock death to hit the news. Might take a while.”

“It should be pretty unclear whether it was suicide or foul play,” Misty said, sliding the computer in front of her and clicking away. “Which means it’ll hit the forums eventually.”

Tai made a face at Shauna and she snickered, whisking eggs quickly in a large glass mixing bowl.

Nat yawned loudly as she walked in, hair wet and face clean and bare. She plopped down in the chair next to Jackie and Van.

“How are they acting?” she whispered, leaning in close and tossing her head back in Shauna and Lottie’s direction.

“Weirdly fucking normal,” Jackie mumbled back, “which is totally… not what I expected.”

“They’ve done it before,” Van said quietly. She sipped her coffee and Jackie frowned at her.

“Out there,” Nat answered, eyeing them carefully, “this was pretty typical behavior for them. Threats and shit one minute, totally fucking unbothered the next.”

Van nodded her agreement, but she was distracted, slipping her phone out of her pocket and squinting at it.

“Mind games, those two,” Nat stood and rubbed Van’s shoulder briefly as she walked past. “I need coffee.”

“Jack,” Van whispered urgently once Nat had taken a seat next to Lottie and joined in the pestering Shauna while she cooked festivities, “it’s Monday.”

Jackie raised an inquisitive brow, but she realized what Van was talking about right as she opened her mouth to clarify.

“It’s Monday,” Van repeated. “It’s the twentieth.”

Fuck.

Jackie and Van spent breakfast dodging calls and sending what they hoped were calm and reassuring texts. It wasn't working.

Lottie excused herself first, murmuring about needing a nap. Tai and Nat had started a loud debate about whether the plywood fix would actually hold up to the severe weather that was rolling in. Shauna and Misty got roped into the argument and, when Nat started digging through the junk drawers for a tape measure, Van and Jackie took their chance.

They wished them luck on their window endeavors and slipped away, scurrying upstairs to the fully furnished office that only Jackie ever used, very occasionally—to finish up edits or send off an email when she couldn't focus enough to do it downstairs on her laptop.

Jackie shut the door gently behind them and turned to find Van's phone thrust in her face.

She took it, holding it the distance that actually allowed her to read it—as much shit as Jackie gave Van for not using her glasses, she had no clue where her own even were—and mumbled the words aloud under her breath.

"I called Lottie. She told me where you are—fucking Lottie, goddamnit!"

"Read the rest!" Van snapped, waving an impatient hand.

"—and that things are 'crazy' right now. You two aren't even picking up my calls and Lottie hung up on me. I want proof of life right now. If one of you doesn't facetime me in the next ten minutes, I'm driving there myself."

Jackie handed Van her phone and she took it, a slight tremor in her hand. She needed a fucking smoke. Jackie sighed.

"Fucking hell."

"Yeah, fucking hell," Van smoothed back her hair and tapped her foot silently on the plush carpet. "We gotta call her. Keep it vague and just… get off as soon as possible."

Jackie headed for the ornate wooden desk, dragging the stool that sat tucked in the corner along with her. It was mostly used as a step ladder, Jackie perching herself on it haphazardly to reach the books on the highest shelves of the cases that lined the walls. She situated it in front of the huge monitor and sat, rolling back the nice leather conference chair for Van.

"Wing it?" she asked, as Van joined her.

"Wing it," Van nodded.

"So… you probably won't be home for Christmas?"

She was trying to look casual, but Jackie could tell she was biting the inside of her cheek. Disappointed. Jackie's chest ached. Van glanced at Jackie, a frown etched into her features, before turning her attention back to the screen.

"You know how Lottie is when she gets like this, birdy," Van said, her voice soothing and gentle.

Jackie saw Van tear at her cuticles under the desk. She touched the back of her hand to stop her, blood already dripping down her index finger.

“We’ll still do Christmas,” Jackie promised, fighting to keep her tone even. “Your winter break is long, we’ll have time. You head to the house and as soon as we can be there, we will.”

She pulled at the strings of her red hoodie nervously, the words Brown Rugby faded in a few spots from frequent washing. The ends of her hair—wavy and dirty blonde—were tucked into the collar. She looked exhausted, dark half-circles under her eyes. Jackie had told her to try and take work off the weekend after finals, but she’d been so stubborn about it.

“I know Lottie,” she insisted. “I can still come. I don’t care if she’s… having a moment.”

Van swallowed audibly. They both hated saying no to her, ever since she was a little girl—looking into her baby blue eyes and refusing her something was torture—and Jackie hadn’t seen her look this upset in a long time.

“I know you do,” Van’s heartbreak was written on her face, “but it’s… different this time.”

Jackie nodded her solemn agreement.

“We’ve just… we’ve never spent Christmas apart.”

Fucking hell.

Jackie avoided her eyes as she steeled herself to speak, surveying her bedroom to distract herself. A stupid fucking choice, because the first thing Jackie noticed was the tattered stuffed rabbit she’d given her for her sixth birthday, tucked against her pillow—gray fur worn flat, one ear patched with thick yellow fabric.

“Sweetie,” Jackie pressed a hand to her chest, trying to still her rapidly beating heart, “this is a time you just can’t come. I am so sorry.”

She didn’t respond, rubbing the bridge of her nose between pinched fingers, obscuring the thick layer of freckles that sat there.

Van looked sick with guilt, her skin paling. Jackie pressed on.

“It’s your break. You and Midori both deserve a nice rest. You aren’t bringing your girlfriend home to this mess, darling girl. I’m sorry.”

“Birdy, we will make it up to you,” Van added. “I promise, sweetheart. But for now, just head to the house and—”

They were interrupted at the same time.

As she twisted away from the screen to face her bedroom door, the office door creaked open and Shauna and Tai walked in. Jackie and Van spun around, mouths hanging open in twin surprise.

“There you are,” Tai huffed. “Nat is—”

Tai stopped suddenly, frowning at them.

“What’re you two doing?” Shauna asked, head tilted to see the screen behind them.

Before either of them could speak, Sadie's voice rang out loud and clear on the other end of the call.

"Hold on! I'm talking to my mom."

20. twisted little happily ever after

1995

"Okay, where do you wanna move after college?" Jackie asked brightly.

"Mmm, I dunno," Shauna said softly, rolling onto her stomach, weight propped up on her elbows.

Jackie held her breath, scared to move from her spot in the bed, flat on her back with her hands laced together under her head. Shauna was so close to her now, her side pressed against Jackie's, the ends of her dark hair brushing Jackie's cheek.

"That's no fun. Come on," Jackie nudged Shauna's leg with her knee, "pick somewhere."

It was hot, the summer air thick in Shauna's attic bedroom. They were both in tank tops and sleep shorts and Shauna took Jackie in, eyes ticking down her body, pausing on her chest… her stomach… her thighs… before roaming back up to her face.

Jackie never knew if Shauna meant for her to notice it when she did that. She never knew anything Shauna was getting at when it came to this and it drove her fucking crazy. She closed her eyes while she waited for a response. She could feel Shauna's gaze all over her. She got like this sometimes, bold and unashamed, especially when they drank.

Jackie's head started pounding, an ache behind her eyes and at her temples. She was sick of wondering, sick of hoping. Shauna liked sex. Or… whatever you called what they did together when they got drunk like this. That was it. She liked the feeling of it and Jackie was there and willing whenever she wanted it, because apparently she was just a fucking idiot who liked getting her heart broken over and over by her none-the-wiser best friend.

But… hadn't Jackie started it? Shauna usually kissed her first, but Jackie was always the one to push her in that direction. She was the one to swipe liquor from her parent's shelves when they were staying in or suggest that they run to the restroom real quick when they were at parties.

Shauna had kissed her that very first time—freshman year in Lottie's bathroom during her inaugural New Year's party. She'd run her tongue along Jackie's lips to ask permission, but Jackie had been the one to twist Shauna's head to the right angle, to claw roughly at her hair and press their bodies closer and fight desperately to keep her attention as the minutes ticked by.

Jackie had been the one to grind against her lap first. She'd been the one to carry this over into their own homes, picking away at the unspoken rules they'd once enforced, until alcohol was the last law standing. Even that was wearing thin now, just one sip enough to justify things some nights. She'd pushed and pulled, plotted and planned and clung to whatever Shauna would give her.

Tonight was no different. Jackie had forgotten a shirt to sleep in, because Shauna's camisoles were too big for her. They gaped open at the top and Shauna liked to sneak glances

at Jackie's breasts when she angled herself right and that gave Jackie the fleeting rush of hope that she'd become so addicted to.

"New York?" Shauna's answer was more of a question than a statement.

Jackie opened her eyes as Shauna shifted, moving to lay half on top of her with one arm on either side of her chest. Jackie smiled at her, quieting her brain, focusing on the light pink of her lips as she ran her tongue over them quickly.

"That's so cliche, Shauna."

Jackie's voice wavered and she hated herself for it. Hated letting Shauna have this effect on her when she knew she never made Shauna feel this out of control.

"Yeah, well," Shauna moved even closer, her nose hovering inches from Jackie's, "there's a reason people wanna move to the city, Jax."

Jackie's eyes were glued on Shauna's lips and Shauna pulled them back into a sly smile—satisfied with herself, the cat that got the canary, because they both knew she was about to.

Jackie's heart sped up. Her abdomen felt hot and knotted and she blushed at the wetness pooling between her thighs so immediately. All Shauna had to do was look at her a certain way and Jackie was desperate for her.

"What about… Boston?" Jackie pressed on shakily. "Or somewhere like, I dunno, Montreal?"

"Montreal? You'd never go that far."

Shauna grazed her waist lightly.

"You don't know that," Jackie argued halfheartedly. "I might."

Jackie wanted more of her. She wanted Shauna's fingers and her tongue. She wanted to know what Shauna tasted like. She wanted Shauna to love her the way she loved Shauna. She wanted to dance with her at homecoming and take her on real, actual dates and kiss her sober.

But Jackie couldn't have that. That wasn't how the world worked.

Shauna didn't want all of her like that, anyway. She wasn't fully broken like Jackie was, she just vacationed in brokenness. So Jackie played the dutiful tour guide, letting Shauna trail kisses along her collarbone or thrust her hips against her thigh, and she collected the pieces of Shauna that she left behind when she went home—to scraggly-haired boys who followed her around like puppies and locker room discussions about Brad Pitt and Bruce Willis with all the other girls who weren't fucked up.

Jackie locked her arms around Shauna's neck and arched up into her. It only took a slight movement, rolling her shoulders down and back, to press her chest against Shauna's, but it gave her a little bit of control in this. Shauna responded immediately, knee slipping between Jackie's legs and lips finding hers.

They laid together after. It was too hot to be cuddling the way they were—facing each other, Jackie's leg draped over both of Shauna's and hand buried in her hair, Shauna's arm snug around her waist—but they did it anyway.

“Do you really think the city makes sense?” Jackie said, picking up where they’d left off. “Like, if we have kids is that not too crazy?”

“If… we have… kids?” Shauna asked, sounding absolutely dazed.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“I just mean, like, at least one of us will probably have kids,” Jackie amended quickly. “Which means, there will be kids… around.”

“Oh, yeah,” Shauna said with a slight frown, the tip of her nose pink. “Yeah, right.”

“And I can’t really imagine raising kids without you there,” Jackie rambled, untangling her fingers from Shauna’s hair and sliding her hand under her own cheek. Shauna’s frown grew and Jackie’s heart thudded uncomfortably. “To be their auntie or their godmother or whatever, y’know? That’s like, a total requirement. For… me, at least.”

Fucking hell.

“I don’t think I could raise a kid without your help,” Shauna mumbled.

She snuck an arm under Jackie’s neck, forcing Jackie’s hand out from under her head. Jackie started running her fingers through her hair again—hesitantly, at first, unsure if that was what Shauna wanted. Shauna hummed quietly and Jackie settled back in, massaging the nape of her neck with her thumb.

“Out of the two of us, you’re definitely the one who’s cut out to be a mom.”

“You could, Shauna,” Jackie assured her, watching her eyelids stay closed longer with each blink, lashes fluttering against her cheeks. “I mean, if you had to. You could be a great mom, all by yourself. But you won’t have to.”

“No?” Shauna grinned, cheek squished up against her pillow.

“Fuck no. If you pop out little Shipmans, you won’t be able to stop me from being there. Day one,” Jackie moved closer, pressing her forehead to Shauna’s chest. “Moment one, really. Like, in the hospital room with you. I’m so serious.”

Shauna laughed and Jackie felt her chest move under her chin and nose. She shivered, despite the heat in the room.

“I don’t think they’d be Shipmans,” Shauna chuckled.

“Right… whatever,” Jackie murmured, letting her own eyes fall shut as Shauna squeezed her closer. “Little Shaunas. That’s so not the point.”

“You’d better be there,” Shauna yawned. “I need you, Jax.”

Jackie felt Shauna’s breath against her hair. She let her hand fall lower, scratching Shauna’s back in small, steady circles. Shauna moaned gently. It wasn’t the same way she’d moaned earlier, with Jackie’s lips on her neck and fingers digging into her hips. It was softer than that. It was Shauna, sweet and happy and sleepy.

“I’ll always be there,” Jackie whispered.

Jackie kept drawing little circles against the skin between Shauna's shoulder blades until she fell asleep, long after Shauna's breathing went even and deep.

2009

"She wouldn't stop crying, Jack. I have to fucking fix this."

Van's hands shook, scissors cutting a jagged line in a scrap of yellow corduroy. She sat on Jackie's dark, faux-leather couch—one that had come with this apartment—with a spool of gray thread and a sewing needle at her side. She hadn't slept in what looked like days, faint purple half-moons under her wide eyes, lips chapped from constantly worrying at them, hair unbrushed and pulled into a ponytail at the base of her skull. In her lap sat Em-Em, looking worse for the wear.

Jackie's assumed name when she'd met Sadie had been Emma. (When Van had glanced wearily at Shauna's annotated copy sitting on her shelf, Jackie'd had Ralph assure Van that he'd chosen the name. The irony was not lost on her.) Sadie had gotten it wrong the first time, calling her Emmy in the tiniest voice Jackie had ever heard. That was the moment Jackie knew she was completely, totally fucked when it came to this kid.

So seven months later, Sadie—newly six—had hugged the stuffed gray rabbit to her chest and proudly announced that her name was Em-Em. Jackie could still see her—hair pulled into pigtails, tongue poking out through the gap her first missing tooth had left the week before, nails glimmering with the silver nail polish Van had actually put her glasses on to apply for her.

"M&M?" they'd asked, "like the candy, sweetie?"

"No, Em-Em," Sadie had insisted, holding the rabbit in the air and spinning in dizzying circles, "like Emmy!"

Sadie had named the rabbit for Jackie. Siobhan had always hated that—a flash of something cruel passing through her light eyes when her daughter had hopped onto Jackie's lap to hug her, squealing her thanks.

"Hand me that, angel," Jackie said softly, taking a seat next to Van. Van hesitated, sucking in a sharp breath through her teeth. Jackie tucked a few stray hairs behind Van's ear and sighed. "I'm just gonna cut it for you."

Van nodded, her fingers trembling when they brushed against Jackie's. Jackie cut a patch —a rectangle with even, rounded corners—and handed it back to Van.

A few hours ago, Siobhan had demanded Van break off all contact with Jackie. Jackie hadn't been there, but she'd heard the story when Van turned up at her door, sobbing and clutching nothing but her keys and the rabbit to her chest.

Siobhan gave her an ultimatum. Van refused. They fought. Sadie heard them yelling and wandered into the kitchen.

Van tried to smooth it over for her, tried to take her back to bed, but Siobhan snatched the rabbit Sadie had slept with every night for the past two years out of her little hands, pulled the

scissors from the knife block, and sliced through Em-Em's big, floppy ear while Sadie screeched.

Now it was Van with the scissors—measuring thread and snipping it carefully, sewing the patch on its ear, sanding down the rough scratch on its little plastic eye with steel wool, holding back new tears as she tried to undo the damage Siobhan had done.

Same as always.

2010

Sadie's bedroom was finally done. She'd been hesitant to pick things at first, but eventually she took Jackie's constant reassurances to heart. She wandered through the aisles of the big box stores pointing shyly at the things she liked while Van and Jackie trailed behind, pushing carts of linens and hand trucks of furniture.

They'd spent the first two days settling in—unpacking the sparse clothing Sadie had left after bouncing between foster homes, ordering takeout from different restaurants to try and find something Sadie would be enticed to eat, watching movies on the couch. More like watching Sadie watch movies—her knees hugged to her chest, Van's sneaking worried glances at her, Jackie sneaking worried glances at both of them.

Sadie was angry. She was scared. She'd watched her mother die from an overdose and, while Van had been the first person she saw after, they'd been separated while the state decided what to do with her. Sadie didn't understand lawyers and paperwork and family court.

Sadie understood that Van was there and then she wasn't.

Twice.

It was day three of Sadie finally living with Van and Jackie couldn't take it anymore. That morning she'd demanded, over the chocolate chip pancakes Van had made for breakfast, that they go on a shopping trip to get Sadie's new room set up just how she wanted it.

They'd painted the walls a light blue and hung navy curtains and made the bed up with an assortment of plush pillows and blankets in every texture. Sadie had held the nails and screws out in her little hands while Van and Jackie assembled bookcases and nightstands. Em-Em the rabbit sat in her rightful place, tucked against Sadie's pillow.

(Van had given it back to her first thing, blinking back tears when Sadie took the toy but shrunk away from her hug.)

In Sadie's mind, Jackie hadn't betrayed her the way Van had. Jackie had always come and gone, leaving for long stretches to work (or because Siobhan had temporarily banished her from their lives). Sadie did let Jackie hug her. She let her read bedtime stories and sit beside her until she fell asleep. So Jackie did, while Van sat outside her bedroom door, silent and broken.

Tonight things were different. Jackie had tucked Sadie into her bed, pulling the covers tight around her, just the way she liked. She read her a few chapters from the shiny, yellow

Nancy Drew mystery they'd been working through. She switched her new bedside lamp off—the one that looked like a crescent moon—and rubbed Sadie's back gently.

Sadie didn't fall asleep. She curled away from Jackie and buried her face in Em-Em and hid her tears. Jackie tried to get her to open up, tried to tell her it was okay to cry, but Sadie wouldn't budge. She kept her lips stubbornly shut and her eyes squeezed tight, feigning sleep.

"Oh, sweetie," Jackie sighed, rubbing her back one final time before standing, "call me if you need me, okay? If you want me to come back in."

Jackie waited for a beat. No answer, just shaky breaths muffled by her duvet.

"I love you so much, sweet girl."

Van was waiting exactly where Jackie expected her—back against the wall, legs crossed, picking at her cuticles roughly.

"Come with me for a minute," Jackie whispered.

"I'm—" Van glanced at Sadie's open door.

"One minute," Jackie insisted, motioning for her to stand.

Van followed her into the living room, hesitating when Jackie sat and patted the couch next to herself.

"Van, sit," Jackie pleaded. "Come on."

Van huffed, but acquiesced, cross-legged again, facing Jackie. Jackie turned to her, holding a hand out with her palm up. Van took it. That's how Jackie touched her now—offering her a hand to hold or a shoulder to cry on and waiting with bated breath to see if she would accept it.

She used to take touching Van for granted. She'd sit behind Van and pull her close when she felt her shutting down. She'd flip on one of their comfort shows and weave elaborate braids into her silky hair, only to immediately shake them out and start again. There was a time when Jackie could've touched Van any way she wanted, without her flinching away. She might've had some explaining to do, but Jackie was certain she could've laid her fingers across her throat or felt for the bone in her wrist or gripped her elbow tightly without Van feeling fear. Van wasn't a trusting woman, but Jackie had been that person for her for years—the one whose touch she accepted without question, whose intentions she never doubted.

But Van had extended her trust to That Woman, and she had broken it for both of them.

"I think she wants to sleep in your room, honey," Jackie said softly. Van frowned, eyebrows drawn together. "She's hurting, but she loves you. She needs you right now."

"Jack, I can't… I'm not gonna force myself back in," Van was choking on the tears she refused to shed. Jackie ran her thumb across the back of her hand lightly and Van squeezed. "She needs to be able to let me in herself. I'm not gonna make her do anything she doesn't wanna do."

"She doesn't know how to ask for what she needs, honey," Jackie watched a lone tear trail down the side of Van's nose and fought the urge to wipe it away. "You have to offer it to her. I

promise you, that's what she needs right now. You're what she needs right now."

Sadie was reluctant when Van went to her, but she offered Sadie the perfect excuse— that wet paint smell can't be nice, what if we all had a sleepover in my room?— and Sadie took it gratefully. Jackie moved the TV into Van's bedroom to make it special, flipping through channels as Sadie lay perfectly still between them.

"Ah, there we go," Jackie smiled as Lucille Ball's face filled the screen, a dramatically sour expression twisting her features. "Good?"

Sadie let out a small chuckle and nodded, her face lit up for the first time since they got her back. She clutched her rabbit to her chest as they watched, running her thumb over the yellow patch, and slowly scooted closer to Van, until her head was against her shoulder. Van carefully raised her arm so that Sadie could snuggle into her side. Jackie watched as Sadie buried her nose in Van's shirt — like she was back where she belonged.

When Sadie's eyes finally fluttered shut, Van let herself cry in silent relief.

"Thank you," she mouthed.

Jackie smiled gently and nodded, flipping the TV off and sinking lower into the bed.

They were going to be okay.

PRESENT

"Did she say mom or moms?"

Shauna put heavy emphasis on the s, gripping the dark wood of the bookcase with one hand and clutching her chest with the other. Her spine curved forward and her chin tucked down, as if she were pantomiming cardiac arrest. She breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth.

Tai stumbled toward them, staggering slightly, stopping just shy of Jackie and Van's chairs and peering at the screen. Her eyes were narrowed and her mouth hung open as she blinked at Sadie from between their shoulders.

"Wait a minute," Sadie said, leaning closer to her screen. Her bright baby blues took in Taissa, before landing on Shauna, just barely in frame behind them. "Is that… are they… holy shit—"

Fucking hell.

Sadie rarely swore in front of either of them, even though neither Van nor Jackie particularly cared. She saved it for moments of total shock or pure outrage—Jackie explaining another sudden, temporary disappearance, Van refusing to let her go on a school trip that involved flying across the country when she was thirteen.

Van let her head fall back against the tall leather chair, her heel bouncing so much Jackie felt it in her own feet, where they lay planted flat against the floor.

Shauna was at her elbow suddenly. Jackie jumped when she felt her brush against her shoulder, leaning in to get a better view of Sadie. Sadie gaped back at all four women, the gears churning in her sweet little head so intensely Jackie could practically hear them.

“Is that… them?” Sadie asked.

“Okay!” Jackie said quickly, trying to keep her voice calm in her haste. “Sweetie, we’re gonna have to call you back.”

Jackie ended the call before anyone could say anything else. They needed to get control of this before it spiraled.

“Taissa—” Van started, tone soft and sweet in an attempt to mask the undercurrent of pure fucking terror that Jackie was sure Tai could hear too.

“Jackie,” Shauna stepped back to look at her properly, chest heaving with effort, “did she… did she say mom or moms?”

“Is that all you can say right now, Shauna?” Tai snapped. “You’re like a broken fucking record!”

“Guys—” Jackie tried, squeezing between her seat and the desk so that she could stand next to Shauna.

“Like you don’t wanna know?” Shauna fired back at Tai.

Van glanced at Jackie, confused, and Jackie returned the expression. Somehow in all of this, Tai and Shauna had zeroed in on each other.

“Not hey, what’s with the secret kid? Just mom or moms?” Tai pressed a hand to her chest and mimicked Shauna’s tone.

“I don’t know about you,” Shauna slid both hands to the back of her hips, “but I’m pretty sure I can handle anything other than them having a fucking child together, Taissa!”

“She’s mine!” Van interrupted, jumping to her feet. Tai looked like she’d been slapped, eyes wide and wounded and chin pulled back. “She’s mine.”

Jackie missed the look Van gave in response, because suddenly Shauna was pulling her close with one arm slung around her shoulders. Jackie’s face landed against the side of her neck, her nose buried in Shauna’s hair. She thought about leaning back, but when she inhaled it was all Shauna and before she knew it, instead of backing up to aid Van in this shitshow, Jackie was clinging to the waist of Shauna’s sweatshirt and nudging her nose against her earlobe.

“Oh, thank God,” Shauna breathed, pressing a kiss to the crown of Jackie’s head. “Thank God.” She locked both arms around Jackie and rested her chin on top of her head.

“Oh, fuck you, Shauna,” Tai spat. “Seriously, just shut the fuck—”

Jackie pried herself out of Shauna’s grip.

“Maybe we should all just sit down and talk about—”

Tai scoffed loudly, cutting Jackie off.

“Why are you so fucking involved in everything, Jackie? You just can’t help yourself, you’ve always got to swoop in and run your fucking mou—”

“Taissa,” Shauna warned, her tone the sharpest Jackie had heard it with Tai since this all began.

Van and Jackie both opened their mouths to speak, but Tai rounded on Shauna before they could.

“Oh, spare me this bullshit for two fucking minutes. I get it, Shauna,” Tai gave a pained laugh and shook her head. ‘This,’ Taissa motioned between Jackie and Shauna, “is your twisted little happily ever after. You got the girl, you’re in love, I get it.”

“Tai, that’s not what I—” Shauna grazed Tai’s forearm, reaching blindly for her hand, but Tai jerked away.

“All you do is make that perfectly fucking clear. I know she’s all you care about, I’m not even asking you to pretend like she isn’t. I’m just asking you to shut your mouth for one fucking second.”

Shauna was wide-eyed and silent, her hand still extended slightly toward Tai.

Taissa pursed her lips, but Jackie swore she saw them shaking before she clamped down. It was too much. Shauna had been through the shock of Jackie alive, and everyone had been giving her leeway for that, but Tai had been through shock after shock of her own, with no rest, even when they’d had the time to sleep.

She was right. Shauna and Jackie had been through hell to get to this place, but they were allowed to exist in this dreamlike realm, this situation where none of the normal rules applied. It sure as fuck wasn’t happily ever after, but it was a storybook turn of events. Jackie was alive and Shauna didn’t hate her and they got to crash into each other because this wasn’t supposed to be possible.

Who cares how fast you move when the woman you thought was a ghost is standing in front of you? Who cares about bombshells from the past when you thought you’d never get a shot at a future? The hits they took hurt, but they didn’t fucking matter.

Nothing could touch them.

Van and Taissa didn’t have that. They had broken marriages and abusive exes and trauma entirely separate from each other. Secret kids and custody battles and lies of omission. They hadn’t been robbed of their choice for twenty-five years. They were forced to face the fact that they went through life knowing how they felt, knowing what was possible, and ignoring it. When they tried to fall for each other, reality was there to force them upright. Every jump was a false start, the universe stamping them return to sender—constant reminders of Sammy and Simone and Sadie and Siobhan. Senate races and ritual sacrifices and every ounce of real world bullshit holding them back.

Van and Tai weren’t untouchable.

“I think,” Van ran a hand through her hair and swallowed, Tai stubbornly avoided her eyes, “I think we… need a minute, guys.”

“Yeah,” Jackie said softly. Shauna’s hand was still slightly raised, like she wasn’t sure what to do with it, so Jackie took it in her own. “Of course you do. Shauna, let’s—”

“Tai?” Shauna asked firmly, resisting Jackie’s tug toward the door.

Tai nodded once and Shauna took the silent reassurance, relaxing into Jackie’s grip.

“Jack, can you call her back?” Van pulled at the sleeve of her white sweater, twisting the hem gently. “I don’t want her coming here, so just… try and keep it vague but say what you’ve gotta say. Tell her I’ll call soon.”

“So… Van had a shitty ex who had a daughter. And when she died, Van got custody?”

Shauna sat bundled up on the small balcony off their room, Jackie’s feet in her lap. Her cheeks were pink and she’d wrapped one of Lottie’s scarves around her neck until it obscured her chin. She was like nine years old again—ringing the bell at the Taylor’s front door, wearing a handmade hat and mittens from her bubbe, a matching set for Jackie in her outstretched hands.

Sadie, nine years old. Van blanching when Jackie took her sledding because Van, like Shauna, who was eyeing Jackie carefully and running her hands up and down her calves absently, hated the mixture of Jackie and the cold even more than Jackie did.

Jackie refused to fear the cold. She hadn’t made friends with it—she relished in her heated mattress topper and hot baths in the winter—but she’d come to respect it. They had history. Jackie made herself sit with the cold when it rolled in, spent time catching up with it over hot tea.

“Sadie,” Jackie said, clutching the mug of soup Shauna had thrust into her hands close to her chest, the heat radiating from it and warming her.

Sarah Marie Sullivan.

Jackie had dropped her phone when Van first told her Sadie’s full name, rushing to pick it up and make an excuse for the sudden static on the line. She’d pretended like she’d been spooked by a knock at her door, rather than the sting of her name, but Van knew. Van always knew.

Shauna Miriam Shipman.

Jackie had worried it would be too close for comfort at every turn—Sadie Marie, with her endless piles of books and her acceptance letter to Brown and her major in English. But Sadie was her comfort. She might as well be her daughter, and Jackie needed to make that clear to Shauna.

“Sadie,” Shauna repeated, offering Jackie a wistful smile. “Pretty name.”

“It is,” Jackie agreed. “Van moved in with them when Sadie was five and they… broke up for about a year before her ex died. She was nine when Van got custody. She’s just… God, she’s the sweetest kid, Shauna. You’re gonna love her.”

“I get—” Shauna cleared her throat, “I get to meet her?”

“Of course you do,” Jackie set her mug down on the small table at her side and leaned forward, covering Shauna’s hand with her own.

“It’s just that Van isn’t, like, my biggest fan,” Shauna explained, shifting in her seat.

“Well… no,” Jackie chuckled a little and Shauna’s expression warmed. “Van is Sadie’s mom, but… I’m as close as you can possibly get to being her mom without actually… being it. So, unless Van has some really strong objections, yeah. You’ll meet her.”

“Okay,” Shauna mumbled, squeezing Jackie’s leg. “I’d like that, Jax.”

“And Van won’t, by the way,” Jackie squeezed Shauna’s hand in response. “Object I mean. I know her well enough to know that.”

They sat in silence for a moment, watching as the waves crashed angrily against the shore. It was too dark for the middle of the day, the sun losing its battle against the sheet of gray coloring the sky.

“How old is she?” Shauna was quieter than usual. Hesitant in her questioning—like she wanted to know, but the answer might hurt her.

“She turned twenty last month. I still can’t believe it. She’s insanely smart. You can talk to her about classic literature,” Jackie prodded Shauna’s stomach with her toes gently, “to your heart’s content.”

Shauna smiled, the apples of her cheeks rising to squish her eyes up in the same sweet way they always had.

“Is that what she’s in school for?” she asked. Tone still off, words still heavy, despite the smile she was giving Jackie. “English?”

“English, yeah,” Jackie answered, bending forward to brush away a hair that was caught under Shauna’s scarf. “She’s a sophomore.”

There was no need to mention where she went to school. Either Shauna had seen her Brown Rugby sweatshirt, cherry red with crisp white trim, and she was choosing not to mention it. Or she hadn’t, and Jackie didn’t need to. Not just yet.

Jackie could sense Shauna trying to fight the heaviness of this. She was trying to keep it light, and Jackie wanted to let her. Shauna had been through enough for a lifetime this past week. If she wanted to wait for this, they could.

Except… maybe that was Jackie projecting. Maybe she was the one fighting to avoid another difficult talk, still reeling from Jeff and the cards and the murdered lover. Maybe she wasn’t giving Shauna space to feel her feelings, just like she’d done when they were kids.

“Are you upset?” Jackie blurted, before she could talk herself out of it. “That I didn’t tell you sooner, I mean? Because… she is Van’s and that’s why I didn’t think I should say anything yet… but I—it would still be fair, if you… were upset.”

Fuck.

“I’m not upset about that,” Shauna said quickly. ‘I’m—it’s just… I always imagined that if you had a daughter, I’d be… something to her,’ she shifted uncomfortably, swallowing and

staring down at her lap. “That if you’d been around, I wouldn’t have had to raise Callie without—I just… we talked about it when we were kids. How it would always be us. I don’t know if you…”

“I remember,” Jackie murmured, running a finger over her cheekbone. “God, of course I remember.”

“I know things didn’t go like we planned, in any fucking way,” Shauna pulled Jackie’s legs tighter against her body. “But it’s… I’m not mad or anything. It’s just… a lot .”

Jackie nodded carefully and Shauna fell silent, twisting the opal ring with her thumb, her knuckle digging into Jackie’s shin as she moved it.

“Hey,” Jackie said gently, “I love you so fucking much. And I’m… I’m here now.”

Shauna smiled, only a hint of sadness in her eyes. She was done talking about this. Jackie chewed her lip nervously, wishing she could hear what Shauna was thinking for what must have been the millionth time in her life.

“I love you too, Jax.”

Shauna looked back out over the waves, running a hand up and down Jackie’s leg, ankle to just above her knee and back again.

The wind picked up suddenly, knocking Jackie’s half-empty mug onto the ground, thick, red soup spreading across the cement.

“Oh, shit—”

“Okay!” Shauna tossed Jackie’s legs off her lap and stood quickly. “That’s enough. We’re going inside.”

Jackie bent to clean the mess, but Shauna took her by the waist and pushed her back, opening the door behind her and shoving her through it.

“Babe, I was just gonna—”

Shauna slammed the door shut behind them.

“I’ll clean it up later. Fuck that,” she unwound the scarf from her neck quickly, exposing her flushed chest. Jackie put her hands against her skin without thinking, Shauna hissing when her palms slipped under her shirt to press against the tops of her breasts, her fingers drawing circles under her collarbones. “It’s… too fucking cold.”

“Mmmm,” Jackie hummed, unzipping Shauna’s coat and shoving it off her shoulders, “well, it’s a good thing you have me to warm you up.”

Shauna laughed at the cheesy line, shaking her head, but her chest started rising and falling quicker. She slid her hands against Jackie’s sides, moving under the layers of sweaters she’d insisted Jackie bundle up in.

Jackie grinned and pulled everything over her head in one swift move. She hadn’t bothered with a bra this morning, knowing they didn’t exactly have anywhere to be. Shauna groaned, glassy-eyed, staring at Jackie’s chest with the same exact enthusiasm she had when they were teenagers, before tearing away to flash Jackie a worried frown.

“It is cold, though,” Shauna said. Jackie cupped her cheek with one hand and her jaw with the other. “Are you sure you’re—”

Jackie slammed her lips against Shauna’s, hungry for her suddenly, like if she waited one more fucking second to have her she’d starve.

And Jackie knew what starving felt like.

She felt greedy— she swallowed Shauna’s moans and pushed her chest further into Shauna’s hands and yanked impatiently on Shauna’s shirt until she broke away to pull it over her head. She lifted her sports bra off and Jackie watched her breasts rebound as the tight material released them. A loud moan escaped her lips—too loud for this shared house, too loud for not having even been touched yet.

“Shhh,” Shauna hushed, nipping at Jackie’s neck.

Her teeth scraped lower and Jackie hooked her fingers under the waist of her pants, tugging her closer as she stumbled back towards the bed. She let Shauna keep licking and sucking at her skin until she got her close enough to shove her onto the mattress.

“Oh—” Shauna gasped. She tried to sit up, reaching for Jackie’s hips, but Jackie pushed her back again. “Jax, what—”

“Scoot back,” Jackie rasped, nodding toward the head of the bed.

Shauna bobbed her head slowly, pushing herself backwards until she hit the pillows. Jackie climbed up after her, immediately straddling her thighs and pressing a kiss to the center of her chest. She felt her own nipples graze Shauna’s stomach as she took one of Shauna’s between her lips, sucking it deep into her mouth. She rolled her tongue over it until Shauna squirmed beneath her.

“Fuck, baby,” Shauna whimpered, pulling on Jackie’s hair so hard her scalp burned. “Please. Please.”

Jackie bit down, and Shauna groaned, thrusting her hips up. When she pulled back, there was a faint indent of her front teeth on Shauna’s rosy skin. She traced it, Shauna whining and wiggling beneath Jackie’s hips so that her thighs slid against each other. Jackie moved down further, resting her chin against the bottom of Shauna’s ribcage so that she could blink up at her.

“Please, what?” Jackie circled Shauna’s nipple with the tip of her nail until she arched into her hand, and then she pinched roughly. Shauna jerked like she’d been shocked with electricity, her back lifting so far off the bed that Jackie’s head rebounded against her stomach when she dropped back down.

“More,” Shauna whimpered, petting Jackie’s hair instead of pulling, her deep brown eyes meeting Jackie’s again. “Please, Jax.”

Jackie nodded against her stomach, but she kept sucking on the skin under her lips until Shauna begged again.

“Please,” she breathed, reaching between their bodies to slip her own hand beneath the band of her leggings.

Jackie pulled back and looked at her work—red blooming above Shauna's navel, the outline of her hand creeping lower beneath the black fabric.

"Wait," Jackie covered Shauna's hand with her own, the material creating a barrier between them.

Shauna whined desperately—almost angrily . Frustrated.

She made to pull her hand away completely, but Jackie clamped down tighter. Shauna peered down at her, chewing on her lip, eyes narrowed and hazy with confusion.

"I didn't say stop," Jackie explained, sliding Shauna's bottoms down to reveal her fingers —frozen, buried in the dark curls between her legs. "I said wait."

Jackie made quick work of Shauna's clothes, tossing them to the ground behind them. She settled herself on her stomach, head between Shauna's legs, so close to her center that she could feel the heat radiating from her on her face. She pushed one of Shauna's thighs up gently, resting her cheek against the other.

Shauna was breathing like she'd run sprints—ragged gulps for air, no pattern to them. Her eyes were wide, locked on Jackie's.

"Touch yourself," Jackie whispered, smiling up at her. "Show me."

Shauna nodded uncertainly and Jackie eased Shauna's hand out of her hair, interlacing their fingers. Shauna softened at the touch, eyes falling shut, body relaxing into the bed as her middle finger pushed lower. Jackie squeezed her hand, transfixed by the wetness pooling on the blanket beneath her and the little circles she drew against her swollen clit. She was quiet, whimpers low and breathy, until she pushed two fingers inside herself and cried out, bucking her hips under her hand.

That was more than Jackie could take.

She latched her mouth onto Shauna, messy and open, capturing everything between her legs, including her hand. Shauna yelped and Jackie pushed against both her thighs until her hips were wide. She took Shauna's wrist and pulled back sharply, Shauna's fingers falling straight from the warmth inside of her to the warmth of Jackie's mouth.

Jackie set Shauna's hand gently on the bed next to them. She drew Shauna's clit between her lips and pushed three fingers deep inside her, curling them against her walls. Shauna's cries verged on sobs, her hands busying themselves in Jackie's hair again.

Jackie moaned against Shauna when she felt her start to drip down the front of her wrist—her own clit throbbing, begging for friction—and the vibration of it made Shauna move faster, her hips rocking desperately. Jackie used one arm to hold her close, reaching under her thigh and pressing down experimentally on her lower abdomen. Shauna gasped, tearing at Jackie's hair again, and Jackie pressed harder.

"Oh my God," Shauna panted frantically, "oh my—oh, fuck. Fuck, Jackie. Yes. Don't stop. Don't— fuck."

Jackie kept going, fucking Shauna deep enough that her palm was covered in her wetness, rolling her clit between her lips, digging the heel of her palm harder into the space just above her pelvis, until Shauna's entire body shook around her. Her thighs smacked into Jackie's

cheeks and her heels kept knocking against the bed as her legs twitched. She repeated Jackie's name so quickly the syllables lost their distance, a hummed mantra rather than a repeated prayer.

Jackie lost track of the number of times Shauna shook especially hard, all her senses overwhelmed by the softness and sweetness of her.

Shauna—the first girl Jackie had ever wondered about, alone in her room, thrusting against a pillow pulled taught between her legs or jerking under her own fingers. She tried to tell herself she was just curious at first. That it was normal to wonder if your best friend experienced… things the same way you did.

She'd wondered if Shauna felt the same as her—warm and soft and slick. If she was stickier sometimes, when she was about to have her period or when she was touching herself before she was fully turned on. If she melted down into something thinner when she was particularly desperate. Whether she rolled like caramel sauce or dripped like water.

Jackie had wondered what Shauna tasted like, more than anything else. Sometimes she would slip her own fingers into her mouth, telling herself it was because she didn't want to shuffle into the bathroom and rinse her hands in the dead of night, and she'd wonder if Shauna tasted like her. If she was skin and salt and the ghost of honey.

She'd learned how Shauna sounded— her wounded little whimpers and her gasping moans and the way she made Jackie's name sound like something solid, something she pulled from deep in her chest and pushed up through her throat until it hit the air. The sounds of Shauna coming undone had echoed in Jackie's ears for so many years she'd worried she'd fabricated them, didn't think she could really remember the exact shape her lips took when she cried out.

Shauna was impossibly soft, her skin easy to glide across. She tasted like water used to rinse ripe summer berries—almost nothing, a hint of sugar, a hint of tartness. And she sounded exactly the same. A deeper version—more mature, less guarded. But the fucking same.

Her Shauna.

Suddenly Shauna was sitting up, yanking Jackie towards her with hands locked firmly on the sides of her head. While Jackie was still dazedly thinking about her, she was stripping off the rest of Jackie's clothes, promising Jackie she'd be good and take it easy on her shoulder, guiding Jackie to straddle her face so that she could keep that promise.

Shauna pulled on Jackie's hips and she obediently sank all her weight down, hands perched on her own thighs.

Shauna fucked her until she was dizzy, until her blinks were too hard and she opened her eyes to white stars dancing across Shauna's dark hair, until—

Until a sickeningly sweet voice rang out in the hallway.

"Jackie! Shauna!"

Misty fucking Quigley.

"Shit," Jackie whispered angrily, trying to swing herself off of Shauna.

Shauna was clearly not on board with that plan—she clamped down where Jackie's thighs met her hips and shook her head violently, which forced Jackie to stifle a moan because her nose rubbed right against—

"Are you two decent?" Misty had a hint of a giggle in her voice and it was louder, closer to their door.

"Shauna," Jackie snapped quietly, jolting her hips back so that she was out of range of Shauna's wandering tongue, even with her craning neck.

Shauna's face was glistening—fine strands of her hair stuck to her cheeks—and she was breathing like she'd just remembered that she needed oxygen to survive.

"No, Misty!" she shouted. Jackie went wide-eyed, covering her mouth with both hands. "We are very much not decent, so what the fuck do you need?"

Jackie tried to shoot Shauna a serious look, but she raised her brows in such a genuine way — well, what was I supposed to say? —that Jackie couldn't help but giggle behind her hands.

"Oops!" Misty was right outside their door.

She sounded like she might be pressing her mouth against the crack of it. Jackie imagined her, resting her forehead against the doorframe, her curls bouncing with the little chuckle she gave in response to Shauna's less-than-appropriate confession. Jackie was so unbelievably fucking grateful they'd made locking the door behind them a habit.

"Well, do you think you could make yourselves decent? We're trying to have a little team meeting downstairs and that's hard to do when we don't have the whole team."

"Team me—" Shauna looked beyond exasperated. Jackie pressed a hand over her mouth.

"Yes! Yeah. Ten minutes, Misty!" Jackie said, glaring at Shauna when she tried to argue.

Jackie gave her another once over. She was flushed, her skin pink and mottled and absolutely covered in— fuck, they definitely needed to shower before they went down there.

"Actually, twenty! Give us twenty, yeah?"

21. it still fucking hurts

"Okay, now that our resident lovebirds have joined us, is everyone ready?"

Misty clapped her hands in front of her, a wide smile plastered on her face. She was wearing a yellow cardigan—one Jackie knew she would've found cute on Shauna, but thought was obnoxious on Misty—and was standing in front of the fireplace, a large whiteboard on wheels behind her. It was Sadie's, from when she was panicking about her AP history exams and Lottie set up everything she could possibly need to study. Misty must've seen it in the basement when she went down to grab the wine from the cellar. Jackie could see Nat grumbling, reluctantly helping Misty haul it up the stairs.

Jackie felt a shiver run through her. She hated the way Misty made her feel. She hated that she was annoyed by her stupid cardigan or the way she was holding Sadie's colorful expo markers in her hands—the ones Jackie and Van had taken turns recording Sadie's dictation with as she paced back and forth with her head buried in her textbook and Lottie dozed on the couch behind her.

Jackie had given Misty so many chances. She'd been kind to her when no one else was. She'd given her the benefit of the doubt over and over. And Misty had offered her nothing but pain in return—snitching on Jackie to the other girls when she knew it might get her killed, forcing Jackie's hand immediately by telling her secrets to the other women, picking at Shauna until she completely broke. Jackie didn't like feeling contempt toward anyone. She was skilled at seeing the best in people and simply ignoring those who she couldn't find the good in.

But Misty's annoying little grin was making her shift in her seat.

"I still don't get what we're doing this for," Lottie sighed.

She was on one of the sofas—the one that was such a pale gray it was almost white—with her feet propped up on the matching ottoman. Her slippers were baby pink and the soft sort of material that looked like luxury. Slippers meant to be lounged in, not worn to keep your feet warm while you worked around the house. The toes of them peeked out from beneath the heavy knit blanket Sadie had made for her during her last inpatient stay—pink, orange, and white bleeding together in stripes without defined lines between them. The psychiatric nurse hadn't allowed the blanket to be brought in because it was against policy, but she'd snuck a picture on her cell phone and promised to show it to Lottie.

"Just let her do the thing, princess," Nat mumbled, patting Lottie's thigh briefly before setting her hands in her own lap again.

Nat was fidgety and sitting forward like she was ready to spring up. She wore what Jackie was pretty sure were Lottie's black sweats, the comfiest thing Jackie had seen her in—no denim or fishnets or leather. There was no black around her eyes either. None of them had any makeup on for the first time since they got back together.

They were sinking into the comfort of the house and Jackie didn't care if that was dumb of them. It made her feel like things were finally how they were supposed to be—everyone tucked in together, away from the world and its bullshit judgment. Like when she was little, piling all her stuffed animals and her favorite books and anything else she might want to keep close onto her bed, building a border around the edges with pillows so that nothing could fall off.

Jackie used to imagine her bed lifting off the ground and floating away, but the idea didn't make her anxious. It made her feel serene. She was ready—Sweetie the stuffed bear and her grandma's music box and her favorite Nancy Drew books were with her and she didn't much mind if they sailed away from the world together.

(When Jackie was eight, she started adding Shauna to the list—letting her in on her secret, because if she was playing on the bed and Shauna was playing on the floor and she imagined floating away, suddenly it wasn't a happy thought anymore. Suddenly she felt the need to jump.)

"It's important that we're all on the same page," Misty announced, gesturing to the whiteboard. "I don't think we've done the best job focusing on the important things, which I totally get! But, people who don't pay attention to detail are people who go to prison for homicide! So, I took the liberty of—"

"Last time you took the liberty of making a fucking presentation for us, it was a shitshow," Shauna grumbled.

She looked exhausted, her lids heavy and her head tilted to the side like she was sick of holding it upright. She glared at Misty, but it was all in her eyes. Misty didn't get the cute little grumpy pout she added when it was aimed at Jackie, or even Tai. Shauna was still annoyed at the interruption from earlier. She'd begged Jackie to stay and finish, wrapping her arms around her and yanking her back into bed when she got up. (Jackie'd assured Shauna that she'd finished plenty of times and that she probably wouldn't be able to walk down the fucking stairs if she finished any more.)

Shauna's hair was damp. She'd towel-dried it roughly before pulling on a long-sleeved tee and clean pajama bottoms that passed as loungewear. They needed to do laundry later, Jackie realized too late that she should've started a load before joining whatever Misty had planned for them once she saw the whiteboard and printed documents laid out on the furniture. Shauna had scoffed and tossed her stack on the ground almost immediately, earning her a scowl from Misty.

"Last night was different," Misty snapped, adjusting herself with a shoulder wiggle and evening her tone out before continuing. "This isn't the past, it's what we're dealing with now."

"I don't see—" Shauna started.

Jackie leaned in quickly, dropping a kiss on Shauna's cheek, resting her forehead against her temple when she drew her lips away.

"Let's just get through it, baby," she whispered.

Shauna huffed but quieted.

“We do need to figure our shit out,” Taissa shrugged. “This isn’t how I would do it, but… whatever.”

If Shauna was exhausted, Tai was worn to the bone. Her hair was pulled back in a low bun and she sat shoulder to shoulder with Van on the loveseat. They seemed okay. Van sat with her legs crossed beneath her, her knee resting against Tai’s thigh. They both looked like they might’ve been crying, but they were still together and that meant everything. Shauna and Jackie hadn’t gone a single day without crying or fighting—it was just part of the process.

Jackie smirked at herself—the way her mind was trying to register getting back together with your high school girlfriend who you went through hell with and once felt irrevocably betrayed by as an established process—and Shauna raised an eyebrow. Jackie shook her head slightly and shifted, climbing behind Shauna and perching herself on the top of the couch with her back against the wall, Shauna between her legs.

Shauna dropped her head back to look up at Jackie. Jackie pulled the hair tie off her wrist and waved it at her, nodding her chin toward Misty’s presentation. Shauna smiled gently and sat forward again, Jackie immediately combing through her hair with her fingers.

“We’ve got a lot to keep track of right now,” Misty straightened her cardigan and Jackie felt something hot and angry pierce through her. She tried to focus on Shauna, massaging her scalp gently to calm her. “And every piece of information we gather on what’s going on with our… collective crimes, is also key in deciphering who is after us and what their goal is.”

“Jesus Christ,” Nat mumbled under her breath. Lottie sighed and pulled Nat back by the shoulder, encouraging her to relax into the couch. Misty’s lips twitched to the side almost imperceptibly.

“I’ve broken it down for us. This is the latest on everything, starting with Adam.”

Shauna flinched, her shoulders slumping forward, curling in on herself. Jackie slipped her hands down to her chest and nudged her back, coaxing her into straightening her spine again.

Misty tapped the top left corner of the board, everything written in blue ink, and started rattling off.

“Still being referred to as a missing person, no links to Shauna that I can find anywhere—which is a miracle honestly— and he seemed to be a real loner. No friends or family to speak of. A coworker at his auto shop reported him missing.”

“You sure know how to pick ’em,” Nat snorted, shaking her head in Shauna’s direction. “No offense, Jackie.”

Shauna tensed and Jackie soothed—the pattern they’d fallen into. She moved quickly, dropping Shauna’s hair in favor of leaning forward to wrap her arms around her from behind and brush her lips against her temple.

“None taken,” Jackie smiled, her chin resting on Shauna’s shoulder, “I know I’m a fucking catch.”

“Anyway,” Misty said firmly, “there’s nothing about him on any of the forums. He isn’t on the radar with any citizen detectives yet, as far as I can tell. He was honestly a great choice, Shauna. No one seems to care about him much.”

“Great choice on the dismembered lover, Shauna,” Tai joked, her tone encouraging, like this was a post-game meeting or one of her staffer debriefs, “that took some real foresight and you delivered.”

Shauna breathed out a small laugh through her nose.

“Guess I’m just a natural, what can I say?”

Lottie giggled and Van gave an exasperated smile, catching Jackie’s eyes and shaking her head in amused disbelief. Jackie grinned back, shrugging. She kissed Shauna’s cheek one more time before sitting back and starting on her hair, parting the front into three sections the width of her thumb.

“Speaking of loners,” Misty tapped at the lower left portion of the board, “Jessica Roberts.”

“Fucking dumbest fake name,” Van mumbled, eyeing Taissa, who pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows— yeah, well.

“Also a loner,” Misty tapped the green section of the board as she read. “I figured as much, since I… had her for a while before I had to kill her.”

“Had her,” Lottie repeated airly, a hint of laughter seeping into her tone.

Jackie pulled more hair into the braid carefully, weaving it tight and even. It was working —Shauna was sweet and serene, relaxing into it. Jackie wasn’t sure she was even listening to Misty at that point, but that didn’t matter. She’d give her the highlights later. She just wanted to avoid another fucking fight, especially one that involved Shauna making threats.

“Only one article on her at all. Local news, online only. She didn’t make the cut for print,” Misty sounded sad almost, her expression… wistful.

Van quirked a brow at Jackie and she pulled a subtle face back, widening her eyes just enough for Van to catch. She didn’t want Misty’s attention on her right now, not when she was wielding a dry-erase marker like she might add one of them to the list at any moment.

“Written off as an overdose, just as I expected.”

Any sorrow Misty had been feeling for her late captive was instantly wiped away, blatant pride taking its place. Tai let out a frustrated breath and Nat clicked her tongue against her teeth, but Shauna stayed silent. Jackie bent forward, Shauna’s hair between her fists so she didn’t lose her place, to check if she’d fallen asleep because how was she so quiet right now? Shauna blinked sleepily up at Jackie.

“Hmmm?” she hummed quietly.

“Just checking,” Jackie whispered, kissing her forehead quickly.

It was good that she was calm. It was. That’d been Jackie’s entire goal.

But… Jackie had this new fear nagging at her, warning her that Shauna might go away. Maybe lulling her into this state was a fucking mistake. Angry Shauna—screaming at Lottie or arguing with Nat or making snide comments at Misty—seemed less likely to disassociate. This Shauna—sleepy, guard down, putty in Jackie’s hands—she wasn’t so sure about.

She pulled Shauna's hair tighter as she worked.

"Lottie's recent snap decision is still completely unreported," Misty supplied, "which is weird, but we can't know whether that's just a matter of the hotel management keeping things hush-hush or part of whatever other cover is going on."

There was a neat line of text at the bottom of the board in green marker that Misty tapped as she spoke—Hotel: nothing. Weird, but inconclusive. Management? Flower senders? Need more info.

Lottie went restless at the mention of her name, nervously rolling her shoulders, blinking quicker. Van watched her carefully, but Nat handled it, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and kicking her own feet up on the ottoman so that their legs rested against each other. Lottie jumped in surprise but Nat tugged her closer gently and she relaxed against her, sinking lower on the couch so that she could rest her head against Nat's chest.

"Okay," Misty pointed at the black scrawl filling the entire right side of the board, "here's where it gets interesting. The AirBnb. We saw the initial fire with no casualties reports but—" she spun around, shuffling through the thick stack of papers next to her "—oh shoot, I think I left some of my materials on the printer."

"We'll get them!" Jackie said.

"I can grab them—" Tai offered the same, in tandem.

Jackie finished Shauna's braid, tying it off at the bottom, and swung her leg around so that she could sit on the couch properly. She wanted a break from this, yeah, but mostly she wanted to get a read on Shauna's mood. She needed to gauge her emotional state, because the uncharacteristic drowsy silence was really starting to spook her.

"Maybe we all need a break," Nat suggested, already digging in her pockets for what Jackie assumed were her smokes and a lighter.

"Seconded," Van nodded, reaching into her jeans for what Jackie knew were her Marlboros.

"But we just—" Misty whined, her head shaking in tiny little motions, so fast you could barely see it.

"Quick break, Misty, yeah?" Jackie said as sweetly as she could. She flashed her a smile and Misty shrugged, walking briskly toward the end table she'd spread her folders across.

"Take five, everyone," Misty agreed begrudgingly. "But please be prompt!"

Jackie stood and Shauna followed, still heavy with something—physical exhaustion, maybe, but it felt deeper to Jackie. She took Shauna's hand and squeezed. Lottie already had one of Nat's cigarettes between her lips, clearly not wanting to be left behind in the room with Misty. They trudged to the door, Lottie hanging onto Nat's sleeve and shuffling a step behind her, Van standing to join them. Instead of following them, Tai edged toward Shauna and Jackie, looking slightly unsure of herself.

"C'mon," Jackie assured her, "let's go get the first look at Misty's presentation."

She shot her a wink and Tai rolled her eyes, but slipped in behind them as they headed for the stairs.

"Can't fucking wait."

"I didn't really get a good look at this room earlier," Tai ran her fingers across the books on the middle shelf, "but this is insane. I mean, my office doesn't begin to touch this and I actually…"

"Work?" Shauna chuckled, scanning the titles on the case closest to the window—mostly classic literature, much of it accumulated by Sadie.

"Yeah," Tai grinned. "Something tells me Lottie doesn't do much of that."

The office looked mostly untouched—the stool Jackie had used earlier that morning still next to the desk chair—but there was a document sitting next to the mouse.

"She does none of that," Jackie laughed softly, heading toward the desk—happy that Shauna was engaging, trying to calm the storm of worry in her brain, writing it off as an overreaction.

"Dora Alexander?" Tai asked. "Isn't this that woman you were obsessed with, Shauna?"

Jackie froze, her fingers brushing over Misty's neatly stacked papers. She didn't move a muscle. Didn't turn to face them or stand up straight. She just hovered, bent slightly at the waist, her head bowed and arm extended, trying to listen over the hammering of her heart.

"I wasn't obsessed with her," Shauna mumbled, embarrassment seeping into her tone. "I was—the book, yeah. I… liked the book. Her writing is… beautiful and raw and I needed something… like… like that."

Jackie slowly turned toward them, Misty's intel forgotten. Shauna was taking the worn paperback from Tai's hands and running her fingers over the cover reverently.

"This is the one that therapist gave you, right?" Tai asked, tilting her head at the back cover, with its black and white photo of Dora smiling wistfully, bundled in a sweater, her long hair windswept. "The one you read about a hundred times? That lesbian painter who was totally in love with her best friend?"

Jackie gripped the desk behind her with both hands, letting her weight sink into them. Shauna blushed lightly and handed the book back to Tai, who slipped it into its place on the shelf, next to all the other memoirs—glossy hardcovers and unassuming paperbacks of every size, all jumbled together.

"I have no idea why your therapist thought that would end in anything but a compulsive need to re-read—"

"Jackie?" Shauna murmured, blinking at her with wide eyes.

She was looking at Jackie, finally, studying her face intently. Like she had when they were teens and Jackie could've sworn Shauna wanted to dissect her, like yesterday at the Exxon

when Shauna's fingers were buried inside her, like when Jackie first turned up in Shauna's kitchen.

Shauna, crawling under Jackie's skin with her gaze.

"Sculptor," Jackie mumbled. Tai raised a brow in curiosity and Shauna rubbed her eyes with her palms, her fingertips shaking. "Dora was—" Jackie cleared her throat, "she was a sculptor, not a painter."

Tears pricked the back of Jackie's eyes and stung in her throat. She and Shauna stared at each other in heavy silence. She could feel Tai watching them, calculating, until Shauna voiced it.

"You—oh, God, Jackie," Shauna grimaced and pressed a hand over her stomach. Jackie's heart sank. "You wrote it, didn't you?"

Jackie frowned—guilt and pain and regret and fucking everything all at once, because this was beautiful, too, wasn't it? Beautiful and tragic and why couldn't they ever have that first piece without the second swallowing it whole?

Jackie wanted to give Shauna the world. She wanted to ease away Shauna's trauma until it ceased to exist, to press reset and offer twenty-two-year-old Shauna herself instead of her writing—her mind and her body and her soul, instead of some words she put onto a page to tell someone else's story.

"Yes," Jackie answered, offering Shauna nothing but a whispered confession.

"Fuck," Tai murmured. 'Okay, I'm gonna—look, I'll give you two a minute,' Tai was at the door suddenly, a shadow in Jackie's periphery because all she could see was Shauna, "just… don't be gone for long enough that Misty sends a search party, yeah?"

They both bobbed their heads dazedly, Shauna taking tentative steps to close the distance between them. The door clicked shut and Shauna pulled Jackie in. Her arms were tight around Jackie, one circling her waist and the other low on her hips.

Guilt was hot in Jackie's stomach. It was physical pain—stabbing and burning—and nausea pulling at her throat. Her hands shook as she laid them on Shauna's cheeks. Her eyes were shut tight and Jackie studied the sweeping lines that pulled at the corners of them, the black-brown of her lashes against her fair skin.

"Shauna?" Jackie asked quietly, timid and cautious.

Shauna didn't open her eyes. She shook her head lightly and took ragged breaths through her nose.

Jackie bit her lip hard, forcing her teeth over the spot where Shauna had drawn blood yesterday. It stung. She pressed harder.

"I'm fucking… I'm—"

Shauna exhaled sharply, finally looking at Jackie. "I'm fucking pissed. Or I—I want to be pissed but I'm just…" Jackie tasted the copper penny bite of fresh blood on her tongue, "I don't have it in me to be."

Jackie's hands slipped off of Shauna's cheeks and onto the back of her neck, thumbs brushing the skin beneath her ears. She screwed up her face, lip still drawn into her mouth, teeth scraping, muscles tense.

Don't cry. You don't get to cry. Don't fucking cry.

"I'm just… I'm fucking sad, Jax. It hurts. I curled up with that book and fucking… cried so hard I couldn't read."

Jackie whimpered, biting back a sob. She tried to drag Shauna closer, but Shauna held steady.

"My chest would ache so much I thought it might rip open and I hoped it would because I wanted to die so fucking badly but I couldn't—"

Jackie tugged again desperately and Shauna relented, tucking her cheek against Jackie's shoulder and resting her forehead against her neck.

"—and I—you were—it just fucking hurts."

Jackie's arms tightened around Shauna's shoulders. She felt sick, stomach churning like it had last night after she'd found out about… everything. She hated this. She didn't want to reckon with this.

It was too much. Shauna married to Jeff, but loving Jackie this whole time. Stabbing the last person she'd had an affair with and chopping him up into fucking pieces. Lying to her about the depth of everything she'd done behind her back and just… all of this was too much. Jackie couldn't keep track of the rights and wrongs or who hurt who the most.

"I'm so sorry. I—I'm… there's no excuse, I'm just—I'm—please."

Jackie didn't know what exactly she was begging for. Forgiveness or understanding or just hitting fucking pause on this.

She didn't get it.

"I didn't come to you once and it was the biggest mistake of my life. I'll never stop being sorry for what I did," Shauna whispered. "But you chose not to come to me every fucking day since then."

"I didn't know," Jackie choked out. "I didn't know. I didn't know you wanted me to. I—"

Shauna nodded against her, gripping her closer.

"I know, baby. But it still fucking hurts."

Shauna pulled back and Jackie stared at her with doe-eyes, wide and shocked. Shauna looked tired more than anything, as she ran her thumb across Jackie's bottom lip.

"You're bleeding," she murmured, staring at the small streak of red that clung to her skin.

"I think I reopened it," Jackie swallowed hard, searching Shauna's face—her full cheeks and her slightly parted lips, pink and starting to chap. "Where you… bit me yesterday."

"Yeah," Shauna looked transfixed by Jackie's lips, eyes glazed over.

She cupped Jackie's jaw and bridged the gap between them, pausing when they were less than an inch apart. Jackie opened her mouth for her, but Shauna just hovered so that they were sharing breaths. Jackie felt that emotional whiplash she'd come to know since they picked up where they left off—screaming to kissing to crying to fucking. Her heart hammered and she scratched at Shauna's back with her nails, the soft fabric of her shirt sliding beneath them.

Shauna shifted, her lips ghosting against Jackie's feather-light. She ran her tongue along the cut slowly and Jackie drew in a sharp breath. Both of Shauna's lips closed around hers in response, sucking gently before releasing with a quiet pop. Jackie whimpered but stayed still. This was Shauna's choice. What they did now was up to her.

Shauna's tongue slid against Jackie's, her fingers digging into her hip and brushing against her jaw. Jackie melted for her.

It was sixteen again—it was kissing just to kiss and making quiet promises without forming words, Jackie breathing in when Shauna breathed out. It was consuming each other—stealing the oxygen from each other's lungs and trading spit and everything else that was so fucking exhilarating back then. Doing things two girls weren't supposed to do to each other and doing them better than any fucking boy ever had. Careful and slow. Like it was an offering they were making. To each other, to the gods. To the fucking forest.

They'd been taking turns forcing the hard talks. They were grown now. They knew the value of actually saying shit out loud and they were desperate to do things right this time.

But Jackie knew Shauna wanted to do this like they had all those years ago—an apology in their fingers, an oath on their tongues.

Jackie didn't need to worry about Shauna being too relaxed any longer. She was angry, taking her frustration with Jackie out on everyone else. They'd been discussing Misty's finds on the AirBnB, mostly a long Reddit thread that Jackie only partially understood because she was distracted by the once-again-volatile brunette snuggled up against her. Anger radiated off of Shauna like something physical, but she was being especially gentle with Jackie, touching her constantly, her hands roaming—rubbing Jackie's thigh slowly beneath the blanket that she'd laid across their laps, holding the hand Jackie didn't have draped around her shoulders, playing with the hem of her shirt.

It was truly startling the way Shauna was able to compartmentalize and redirect. Jackie met her energy, holding her close and turning to nudge her cheek with her nose or kiss her temple occasionally, because what the fuck else could she do? She'd hurt Shauna so fucking deeply. All Jackie could do was fight the breakdown that the guilt threatened to send her spiraling into and give Shauna everything she could of herself.

"So, there are theories about the fire?" Tai asked, legs crossed, foot bouncing in little circles. "I just don't see how this connects to us. It's not like anyone has mentioned us, right?"

"Well, no," Misty flipped a page over, "but they do have the name Jackie booked it under. Monica Tallings. Unique name, and pretty easily determined a fake by the citizen detectives. All it takes is a quick search on ancestry.com to know that anyone with the last name Tallings

should be easily distinguishable. There are only a handful on the east coast, and Monica doesn't even—"

"We fucking get it," Shauna snapped, drawing light circles above Jackie's knee. "Jesus fucking Christ, I still don't get why we're doing this bullshit rundown—"

"You're not the only one who needs to get it, Shauna, damn," Nat fired back before Misty could, Lottie leaning against her and scrunching her nose at the volume. "What the fuck is up with you? You're being a real—"

"Okay!" Jackie yelled, cutting Nat off before this could turn into something more serious. "Just—okay, let's just keep going."

Shauna stilled against her and pain shot through Jackie's head like someone had taken a knife and slashed a jagged line behind her eyes. She shut them tight, and Shauna's hand found her cheek.

"Jax, what—"

"Guys, we really need to get back to—"

A gust of wind enveloped the house, so loud it drowned out Misty's attempts to refocus them.

"Just shut up for a fucking second, Misty!" Shauna spat.

Jackie felt tears leaking from the corners of her eyes. The storm was coming. The storm that had been looming over them like a goddamn threat was coming to join all the other threats and they'd killed a bunch of fucking people and everything was a disaster and she was a monster who'd made Shauna's life a living fucking hell.

She sniffled, trying to gain some composure. Rain started hammering against the window. Jackie opened her eyes to a sky so gray it was almost black and fat drops of water pelting the glass at a harsh angle and Shauna's face twisted with worry.

"You have been so disruptive this whole time," Misty whined, crossing her arms. "It's like you don't think you need my help, even though you so clearly—"

"I don't need shit from you other than some fucking peace and quiet!"

"That certainly wasn't the case when you stabbed your lover!"

"I didn't even call you, Natalie di—"

Jackie surged forward, pressing her lips to Shauna's, her arms wrapping around Shauna's neck. Shauna was frozen for a moment, her lips open in the shape they'd taken to form her last word, but she met the kiss after a beat, holding Jackie's waist.

"What the fucking hell?" Natalie groaned. "Seriously, the level of fucking insane mood swing bullshit around here! Can we never just have a normal fucking conversation?"

Jackie broke the kiss and hugged Shauna to avoid taking in her stunned expression, her chin resting on Shauna's shoulder. Shauna rubbed her lower back slowly.

“Nat, they’re just…” Van sighed heavily. “They’re going through it, I don’t know. Just… let them be crazy, they can’t fucking help it.”

Van, Misty, and Nat kept talking, the low hum of their voices blending together in the background, but Jackie couldn’t make out the words they were saying. She mostly noticed the absence of Lottie and Tai. Her head was pounding, the house was loud, creaking angrily, and she swore her heart was beating so obnoxiously that even Shauna must be able to hear it.

“You’re not mad at them,” she mumbled in Shauna’s ear.

“I wouldn’t call it mad,” Shauna whispered back, “but I’m not exactly—”

“No, you’re not mad at them. You’re mad at me.”

Shauna slid her hand under the back of Jackie’s sweater and scratched over her skin lightly.

“Jackie,” she said gently, “I’m not—”

“You’re mad at me and you don’t know how to be,” Jackie’s whisper was still low, but her voice was pitching higher, “because this is all too much and so complicated and—and even if it wasn’t, I never let you be mad at me so you just went around doing all sorts of… awful shit because you had it all bottled up and it’s the same fucking—”

“Shhh, shhhh. It’s not the same,” Shauna spoke in a low rumble, louder than a whisper but quiet enough to make it clear to the other women that they shouldn’t be trying to listen. ‘It’s not the same thing, okay? I’m not mad at you. I’m upset. I’m fucking… sad,’ Jackie nodded against her, her chin digging into Shauna’s shoulder and her forehead brushing against her hair. “And you’re right, it is complicated. I think it’s… amazing that you—you wrote this book that I happened to find and it was so fucking important to me. But that and the fact that you’re basically a… a mom and I didn’t know— it’s just—I’m upset. I’m frustrated. I’m not angry, okay?”

Jackie swallowed.

Get it together, Taylor.

You can’t just throw yourself at Shauna every time you’re upset. You’re out of control, it’s fucking embarrassing, you can do better than this. Be better than this.

“Yes. Okay. God, I’m sorry,” Jackie tried to pull away, but Shauna squeezed her tighter, so she settled her arms back around her neck and squeezed back. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. We’re okay,” Shauna promised. “Besides, I think you’d know if I was angry.”

“Yeah,” Jackie chuckled, small and watery, but it was something. “I guess that’s true.”

“I’m annoyed with them, because I want to be spending every fucking second alone with you right now and I can’t—”

A branch whipped against the window with a sharp crack and thunder boomed overhead. The chatter in the room died out, everyone falling into a heavy silence.

“—because these bitches,” Shauna added at a normal volume, “wanna murder bellboys and have meetings about it.”

“Again with the bellboys!” Van exclaimed, shaking her head. Shauna released Jackie and they resettled, Jackie’s arm back around her shoulders. “That might be your craziest take. Why are you so locked on to calling him a bellboy?”

Shauna chuckled. “Well, now I do it because it bothers you so much.”

Nat snickered, Tai gave an airy laugh. Jackie flashed Van a grateful look and she shot her a wink in return. Lottie smiled along with them, but her gaze kept falling nervously on the window.

“My point was,” Misty regained the floor, tapping at the printout with its tiny typed boxes that none of them could actually see from where they sat, “people think it’s suspicious. No, we haven’t come up. Yet. But there are dozens of people looking into this right now and with the hotel situation being pretty easily traced back to us, I think we should be prepared for everything to fall into question.”

“So, should we really be printing all this shit out then?” Nat asked, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I mean, if you think it’s gonna come back to us then isn’t this just a neon sign, like hey cops, we printed all this shit out that you hadn’t even connected yet?”

“Oh Natalie,” Misty chuckled, “printing isn’t traced. I just work best with paper in front of me. Looking it up in the first place is the dead giveaway, but none of us have been careful about anything.”

“That’s very fucking true,” Jackie mumbled.

She couldn’t think about how reckless they’d been without panic rising in her chest. She knew they could get out. With Lottie’s money and her connections, they’d just have to run if anyone looked their way. There were complications though—kids and spouses and some less than private jobs—and Jackie didn’t want to start considering the implications of those unless she really had to.

“So, I figure it can’t hurt us to keep researching things. If someone official suspects us, we’re already screwed on the circumstantial evidence front. Though Jessica has already been declared an overdose and she’s six feet under, so they only have one body—the not a bellboy—” Misty grinned as she joked, but Shauna grimaced and Van just rubbed her forehead and nodded halfheartedly, “and that one will be hard to definitively prove cause of death on, so—”

“So, this whole thing was for nothing,” Shauna whispered loudly. Jackie knocked her head against Shauna’s, resting it there.

“Not for nothing,” Misty sighed. “To remind us that we’ve stirred up quite a bit of chaos and that we need to keep track of what we’ve done instead of tearing through like a hurricane and never looking back.”

Unfortunately for all of them, Misty had a point.

The rest of the day was largely uneventful—no big group discussions or couple’s quarrels. Jackie washed the pile of dirty laundry in her and Shauna’s room, offering to throw in the other women’s essentials when she didn’t have enough clothing from Shauna for a full second

load. (Somehow she ended up doing four full loads, neatly folding everyone's laundry and stacking it in their rooms.) She changed their bedding out and called Sadie—still annoyed, still angling to join them—while Shauna cooked for everyone.

Jackie held her breath through dinner, praying they wouldn't have a repeat of the night before, but it went fine. Everyone ate a decent amount—even Tai—and the conversation stayed relatively normal. Shauna maintained her mood—sweet with Jackie but snappy with the others, namely Misty— but she was quiet for the most part. They moved from the dining room to the living room, seeking the warmth of the fire with their after dinner drinks.

"I just can't believe you're a mom, Van," Misty mused, plopping down on the floor in front of the fire next to Nat, who was swirling the whiskey in her cup slowly, watching it slosh against the sides.

Van had broken the Sadie news to everyone earlier, giving them the basics, avoiding any specifics on Siobhan or information Misty might decide was useful later.

"Yeah, well," Van mumbled, eyeing Taissa, "surprise, I guess?"

Tai smiled at Van when she glanced over. It didn't last, it wasn't a grin or anything, but it was something. A small twitch of her lips that said we're going to be okay. Or at least that was how Jackie was choosing to interpret it.

"Actually, all of you moms surprise me."

Misty took another sip of her cocktail—something a sickly pink color that Jackie didn't even think was possible with the ingredients they kept on hand. Jackie pulled Shauna closer with the arm she had wrapped around her waist. She smoothed a hand over the white plush throw that covered their laps.

"Tai and Shauna seem the least mom-like of any of us, and yet here they are!"

Tai shifted in her seat and Van shot Misty a weary look. Jackie felt Shauna tense against her. She made to whisper in her ear—just ignore her, we can go to bed soon —but Shauna responded before she got the chance.

"Like you're the fucking parenting expert?" she scoffed. Where Misty had been light, her biting words shrouded in a casually curious tone, Shauna was overtly sharp. "What, do you take that bird to mommy and me classes, Misty?"

Misty laughed, tossing her head back. It was forced. When she brought her attention back to Shauna, there was something dangerous in her eyes, even though a smile was still fixed on her lips.

"At least I talk about Caligula. No one would even know you had a daughter."

"Misty," Tai warned, sitting forward in her chair, her body tilting automatically towards Shauna's, "that's enough."

Jackie felt her heart pick up speed. Her jaw tightened but she fought it, opening her mouth to shut this down. Misty was faster. She set her glass down next to her and Natalie jumped at the clinking sound it made when it hit the tile.

“It’s funny, because if you asked me when we were kids,” Misty said in that nasty fake-sweet tone of hers, “I would’ve said you’d be one of the better moms on the team. But it seems like it isn’t your favorite thing in the—”

“You don’t know shit about being a mother,” Shauna snapped.

Her face was unreadable, but Jackie felt her clenching her muscles. Tai’s jaw hung open. She made eye contact with Jackie and they both slid forward a few inches, ready to spring into action.

“You don’t know how you’d react to motherhood unless you experience it,” Van interrupted smoothly. “So why don’t we lay off—”

“I’m not a mother, but I am a caregiver,” Misty argued, shaking her head a little and shoving her glasses up. “And I know I would never let my innocent baby starve because I couldn’t be bothered to—”

Tai and Nat spoke in tandem.

“Misty, shut the fuck—”

“—don’t finish that fucking sentence—”

Jackie assessed Shauna, looking quickly for signs of disassociation. She squeezed her waist, maybe a little too hard.

“What exactly,” Lottie spat at Misty, “are you trying to do right now?”

Jackie ignored Misty’s nothing of a response—equivocation and evading guilt—in favor of staring at Shauna. She was silent, a bad sign, but she met Jackie’s eyes. Broken. Hurting. But there. Jackie pressed a quick kiss to Shauna’s forehead. She could come back to mend the damage later. Right now, she needed to make sure she cut off the source.

“Misty,” she said curtly, forcing a small smile. She stood and tucked the blanket back around Shauna’s lap when it shifted, “would you come chat with me in the dining room real quick?”

Shauna was still sitting in stunned silence and for a brief moment the rest of the room joined her. Everyone was staring up at Jackie, including Misty, who blinked stupidly at her from the floor. She shifted to stand slowly.

“Uhh… sure thing, Jackie!”

Jackie didn’t feel hate often. Indifference, sometimes. Disdain for the real assholes of the world, sure. But hate was special to her. It was reserved for those few people who deeply infuriated her. People like Siobhan and her parents.

Misty Quigley had just made the shortlist.

Jackie led her to the dining room, glaring at Nat when she tried to stand and follow, assuring them all they’d be right back.

“I don’t know what that was, but you’re never pulling something like that again.”

Jackie kept her voice low. She knew at least one of the women likely had followed to listen at the door. She just hoped Shauna was still tucked in on the sofa. Misty was backed against the wall furthest from the door and fidgeting. She'd been silently watching Jackie take deep, centering breaths as she tried to decide how the fuck to say this.

"I wasn't—"

"No," Jackie snapped. "You don't get to speak right now."

Misty frowned, but closed her lips.

"I don't care how much of a bitch Shauna is to you, you will never ever speak to her like that again."

"Well," Misty sighed, shaking her head. "I don't think you can really dictate how I talk to anyone. I get that you're protective, trust me, and I'll try to be more mindful of—"

"You're right," Jackie patted her shoulder twice, hard enough that her upper body swayed. "I can't dictate anything. So instead, I'll just tell you what'll happen if you do."

Misty raised her brows, inquisitive, and Jackie knew she wasn't taking her seriously, but that wasn't the point. The point was, Jackie liked to give people proper warning. Whether or not Misty believed her was entirely her problem.

"If you talk to her like that again, if I hear you so much as say the word baby, if you purposefully try to hurt her like that, I'll make sure you never can again. I'll take her and leave if I have to and we'll let the rest of you fend for yourselves for all I care—"

Misty chuckled. Her curls bounced, springing up and down against her shoulders and brushing against her bright yellow cardigan.

"It's not like we have the choice to split up, Jackie. You said so yourself. I didn't mean to —"

"And if we can't leave," Jackie continued. "I'll find another way to make sure you can't pull this shit again."

Misty's smile was wide, her lips pulled tight and thin across her teeth.

"Oh Jackie," she tsked, taking a small step forward, "if I didn't know any better that would sound like a threat."

Jackie didn't back away. She looked down at Misty, studying the twinkle in her eye magnified by her thick lenses, and smiled back.

"I've found it's best not to assume you know better," Jackie said. "People can always surprise you."

Jackie went through her usual bedtime routine, applying serums and creams to her skin, wearing one of Shauna's oversized tee shirts and freshly-cleaned sweatpants. She was trying to keep things normal, like maybe if she ignored Shauna's frantic energy it would ease away.

Shauna hadn't even changed into pajamas yet. She was pacing back and forth in front of the locked door, occasionally stopping to look at Jackie in disbelief.

Van and Shauna were getting along, fueled by a shared anger at Misty. It was a good thing, overall, but it also meant that Van had tattled on Jackie immediately after she scurried back into the living room, recounting what she'd overheard of her conversation with Misty to Shauna.

"Are you gonna come to bed tonight," Jackie turned to face her from where she was sitting on the small bench at the foot of the bed, 'or are you gonna keep doing… this?' Jackie waved a hand in Shauna's general vicinity. "Because you're making me anxious and I'm over it."

"I'm making you anxious?" Shauna whisper-yelled. She stopped pacing and stared at Jackie, mouth hanging open for a second. 'Babe,' she said, brows raised as high as they could go, "you threatened Misty! For a second time! Misty! I mean, she scares me."

Jackie scoffed, letting her hair down and shaking it out. "She scares me," she mimicked Shauna. "Why do you say it like that? What, like you're such a threatening person that you aren't afraid of anyone?"

Shauna gaped at Jackie again. "I mean, kinda. Yeah. That's sort of my whole issue," she nodded a little as she said it, eyes wide like she couldn't believe Jackie was even asking her that question right now.

"Okay, I mean yeah," Jackie twisted her face a little, lips moving to one side. "But it's not like I can undo it now."

"Fuck, Jackie!"

Shauna resumed her pacing, covering the small stretch of hardwood in front of the door then spinning around on sock-feet to begin again.

"Calm down," Jackie whined. "C'mere." She extended an arm toward Shauna, who ignored it.

"I don't wanna kill Misty fucking Quigley," Shauna whispered angrily.

"Oh my god, Shauna. We are not gonna kill her!"

"Oh, I know we're," she gestured wildly between herself and Jackie, "not gonna do anything, but I'm—" she put her hand on her chest, "also not going to let her… poison you with a cigarette or something!"

"I haven't smoked in years and I really don't think she's gonna poison someone else's pack just in case I bum one."

"Jack-ie," Shauna's voice was pure exasperation.

Jackie scooted herself up onto the bed, resting her back against the headboard and stretching her legs out in front of her. She reached out toward Shauna, with both arms this time, and pouted. Shauna let out a long sigh before caving in. She laid next to Jackie, head on her lap and body pressed against her legs, just like she had in her sleep the night she went away.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Jackie promised, running her fingers over Shauna’s hair, the reassurance as much for her as it was for Shauna.

“I shouldn’t even be next to you,” Shauna mumbled. Jackie massaged her temple with two fingers and she let her eyes fall shut. “I should be like… standing guard.”

Jackie chuckled. “You’re a light sleeper, you’ll wake up.”

Shauna glared up at her for a second before placing her head back on her lap. “You’re lucky you’re so cute.”

“Hmm. I love you, baby. And I love that you’re so protective of me. It’s hot,” she nudged Shauna a little with her foot, “but no killing anyone. At least, not on the offense.”

“Feels like the defense to me.”

“Shauna.”

“Fine.”

Shauna got ready for bed, slipping back in next to Jackie, who’d been watching her appreciatively. Jackie was laying on her side, propped up on her elbow with her head resting in her hand. Shauna matched her position, facing her.

“Did you ever think this was a conversation we’d have to have?” Shauna asked quietly.

“What, me telling you not to kill someone in my defense?”

“Ah! So it is defensive?” Shauna asked, grinning. Jackie smacked her shoulder lightly. “But… yeah.” Her grin slipped away and she watched carefully as Jackie chewed on the inside of her cheek.

“Do you remember in 8th grade when Johnny Garder grabbed my ass in the lunch line?” Jackie asked, tracing a finger down Shauna’s cheek.

“Of course I do, that little asshole.”

Jackie smiled softly. “I cried immediately.”

“I remember.”

“And you,” Jackie moved to trace Shauna’s brow, “just calmly took my tray out of my hands and set it down so I wouldn’t drop it.”

Shauna hummed in agreement.

“Then,” Jackie traced her nose, ‘you pulled me behind you,’ let her hand trail down Shauna’s neck, “and you turned around and punched him so hard he lost a tooth,” rested her hand on Shauna’s chest, drawing lazy little circles with her thumb. “You broke your fucking hand.” Jackie kissed her forehead. “So, yeah. I think that when… when I imagined us together like this, I would imagine there would be times we would have this conversation. Or at least something like it. I know you, Shauna.”

Shauna kissed Jackie, soft and sweet. Jackie pulled her close, meeting the kiss lazily for a few minutes. When they pulled apart they readjusted themselves—Shauna on her back, one

hand behind her head, the other around Jackie's waist, Jackie on her side, one leg thrown over both of Shauna's and head on her chest.

"You thought about us together like… like this?" Shauna asked softly.

"Mmmm, all the time," Jackie whispered sleepily, nodding into Shauna.

"Why didn't you say anything, Jax?" Shauna mumbled.

"Why didn't you?" Jackie fired back.

Shauna tensed for a moment, her chest tightening under Jackie.

Fuck.

Jackie lifted her head to press a kiss to her neck and Shauna relaxed, squeezing her closer. Jackie settled back in against her, reaching up to play with her hair.

"I was scared you would reject me," Jackie answered. "I thought the best I was ever gonna get was hooking up when we were drunk and cuddling when we spent the night with each other. I was scared if I said anything or… or tried anything more you would freak—"

Jackie yawned despite herself, exhaustion heavy and pulling down on her lashes. Shauna rubbed wide circles on her back.

"—I thought… thought I was making my feelings for you clear, thought you were humoring me because you didn't feel the same. But I didn't even care if you were, some of you was better than none of you. I just… wanted you."

"Yeah," Shauna sighed. "Me too."

All this mess, all this time apart, all this heartache. All because they were both fucking scared.

Shauna fidgeted, wiggling her upper body beneath Jackie and—fuck. And tensing her arm, because Jackie's head was resting against her injured shoulder.

"Oh, shit," Jackie gasped, shooting up. "Babe, your fucking shoulder!"

"I'm fine, it's fine!" Shauna insisted, reaching out for Jackie and waving her towards her. "It's not that bad. Really."

"Oh, you have got to tell me when I'm hurting you, Shauna, I can't do this!" Jackie whined. "I feel so fucking awful every time I realize. Please."

Shauna reached for her, beckoning towards her chest. When Jackie shook her head instead of acquiescing, Shauna sighed heavily.

"You're not—"

"Shauna!"

"Okay, okay," Shauna palmed Jackie's cheek and gave her an earnest look. "I'll tell you. I promise."

She reached for Jackie again, but Jackie just crossed her arms stubbornly.

“Get comfy,” she demanded.

“I… sort of need you to do that.”

Shauna blushed and Jackie softened, brushing baby hairs away from her face and biting back a grin.

“Okay, I mean find a comfortable spot and I’ll add myself to the equation.”

Shauna rolled onto her side reluctantly, facing away from Jackie but inching backward before Jackie could even lay down, as if she was afraid Jackie might not immediately wrap around her. Jackie slotted herself behind Shauna, chest pressed to her back, nose in her hair, and arm snug around her waist.

“Better?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Shauna admitted sheepishly.

“You said you’ve been staying up to listen to me,” Jackie mumbled, sliding her fingers under Shauna’s shirt to rest them against her stomach. “Last night, I mean. Have you really?”

Shauna swallowed. Jackie felt the ripple of it against her chest.

“How could I not?”

Jackie blinked back a stray tear, but she kept her tone steady.

“Try not to tonight, yeah?” she suggested gently. “Try to sleep for me, baby.”

Jackie nudged Shauna’s hair away from her neck with her nose, exposing a small stretch of skin. Shauna gave her sleepiest moan, the one that had always told Jackie she was desperate for rest, as Jackie peppered kisses there.

“Will you try for me?” Jackie repeated.

“Mhmm,” Shauna hummed.

Jackie didn’t let herself close her eyes until Shauna’s breathing deepened with sleep, her exhales rhythmic whistles, her stomach rising beneath Jackie’s hand.

“Fuck!” Shauna snapped, flipping the bedside lamp on.

Her hair was half-loose, thick strands pulled out of her braid, and her eyes were fixed on the window. The room lit up even more for a moment, lightning flashing outside the window. The rain wasn’t drops or even buckets—it was sheets, sliding down the glass like they were passengers on a sinking ship.

Jackie’s head seared with pain. She hissed, burying her face in her hands.

“Jax?” Shauna slid her hand along Jackie’s spine carefully. “Are you okay?”

“Headache,” Jackie managed through gritted teeth.

The wind screeched like something alive. Something angry. Jackie had only heard it like this a few times and it was never a good sign. Her ears throbbed with pressure.

“Oh, sweetie,” Shauna mumbled, the initial shock wearing down, loosening enough to let exhaustion seep back in. “Let’s get you something for—”

Thunder boomed—the lightning wasn’t at their front steps but it was fast approaching—at the same time the glass started to rattle in the window frame.

“Fuck, okay,” Shauna stood, walking around the bed quickly to stand between Jackie and the window. “Downstairs, I think.”

Jackie clapped her hands over her ears against the pain shooting through them. Shauna pulled her up urgently by her waist, trying to guide her straight to the door, but she yanked her back.

“Hold on,” she rasped, her voice broken, on its way to lost. Another bad sign. She grabbed Shauna’s duffel—ignoring the journals burning a fucking hole in the bottom of it—and tossed armfuls of their freshly cleaned clothing into it. “We need to bring down whatever we don’t want ruined. Just in case.”

Shauna nodded and pulled Jackie’s phone charger out of the wall, slipping it and her phone into her pocket before doing the same with her own.

“Grab some pillows and the comforter,” she added. “We’ll probably end up sleeping in the basement.”

Shauna was efficient, piling the throw blanket and pillows into the center of the duvet and folding the corners in to wrap it all up. She slid the tangle of bedding to the ground and looked at Jackie expectantly.

Another pass of lightning, thunder closer on its heels this time.

“Jackie, come on! I don’t like this, let’s—”

“One second!” Jackie scurried to the nightstand and Shauna dropped her haul, running around to slip between Jackie and the window again.

Jackie pulled the tape out of the drawer and tossed it into the bag.

“Okay, let’s—” Shauna was antsy, increasingly impatient. Jackie snatched up her books, tucked behind a box of tissues and her glass of water. “Really, Jax? There are about a million books in that office and like one small window, I’m sure—”

Jackie held them in front of her silently, the annotated copy of Emma on the top. Shauna stared blankly for a second before recognition flashed in her eyes. Her mouth moved wordlessly as Jackie set them in the bag and zipped it up.

“Oh,” Shauna breathed. “I—Is that—”

Crack. A branch flew, smacking into the window so hard it shook violently.

“Let’s go!” Jackie croaked, slinging the heavy duffel over her shoulder.

“She’s passed the fuck out, do you really think we need to wake her?”

Nat was standing in front of Lottie's bedroom door, her hand hovering on the edge of it, holding it half closed. She was wrapped in one of Lottie's silk robes—pale pink with delicate cherry blossom branches, bluebirds perched on them—her ribs visible where her chest was exposed. Jackie wanted to feed her and wrap her up in something warmer.

By the time Shauna and Jackie had come tearing down the stairs, everyone was congregated in the hallway outside the master bedroom. Van and Tai had their bags with them. Misty clutched her supply backpack, a handful of clothes hanging across her forearm.

"The ceiling did cave in once," Jackie said with an air of finality.

"Fuck," Nat mumbled.

"So I think yeah, we're all going downstairs," Jackie's voice cracked with every word, her throat burning. "Everyone take your stuff down and we can come back up and grab the cushions off the couch."

Blank faces stared back at her.

"What?" Tai asked, raising her voice to be heard over the wind.

"Everyone take your shit down to the basement," Shauna yelled, "grab cushions off the couches if you want something to sleep on. Nat, get Lottie up."

She looked at Jackie—that everything?—and Jackie bobbed her head once in confirmation.

"And," Van pointed at Nat, "put some real fucking clothes on because you're gonna be cold as hell, but more importantly I can't look at you in this shit all night."

"What, not interested?" Natalie wiggled her eyebrows. Any other time, Jackie would've laughed. Instead, thunder clapped in response. "Oh, Jesus, okay—"

Jackie pulled open the basement door and waited, ushering Misty in first, loaded with throw pillows. Misty seemed to be over their previous conversation, but Jackie didn't trust it. She'd have to keep an eye on her. Van and Taissa were next, Van's hand perched on the small of Tai's back. Shauna threw down armfuls of blankets, leaning against the doorframe and interlacing her left foot with Jackie's. Over the roar of the storm, Jackie could vaguely hear Nat slamming drawers open as Lottie whimpered, her voice pitchy and panicked.

Fuck.

The last time they'd had a storm this bad—winters ago, Sadie was probably eleven or so. She was just barely too big for any of them to carry easily—not that she or Van had even tried because they were too preoccupied with Lottie. Sadie had just stood at the foot of the stairs clutching Em-Em, watching with huge eyes as Van guided the trembling woman to the couch and into Jackie's arms. That night's tears had ended with Sadie reading something aloud to soothe Lottie—and, if Jackie's being honest, Van and her as well. Three grown women, all hanging on the edge of a little girl's gentle words.

"Lot, it's fine—"

"We didn't prepare —" Lottie squeaked. A rush of pain shot through Jackie's head at the sound, and she winced, gritting her teeth. Shauna twitched.

“Hurry the fuck up, Matthews,” Shauna shouted, swooping over to Jackie’s side and forcing her face into the slope of her neck. Jackie breathed her in all over again—sweaty and warm, pulse elevated just a bit too high, her carotid buzzing against Jackie’s cold nose—and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to numb the throbbing.

She felt, rather than heard, Lottie and Natalie pass them—Lottie shaking violently, Natalie fumbling more awkwardly than usual—and then Shauna was in front of Jackie, pulling her over the threshold, steadying her around the waist, and slamming the door shut behind them, muffling the heavy peals of wind and rain.

Jackie blinked open her eyes. Once everyone else was safe and accounted for, once the din of the storm was further away, Jackie could think about herself—and that’s when the panic came. It hit her like it always did—a kick to the chest, the wind knocked out of her lungs. The stairs stretched before her. An endless trail down.

Down like the bunker.

Jackie hated being underground. She’d worked through it some, able to tolerate quick trips down to the basement for a fresh bottle of wine or to retrieve one of Sadie’s toys, but that was her limit. Every time they had to stay down here, it took a fresh toll on her.

She froze, both arms outstretched. She gripped the banisters on either side of her in shaking fists, squeezing until the wood dug in and the ache in her palms rivaled the one in her temples. Shauna made it two steps before she realized Jackie wasn’t following.

She spun around to stare up at her as Van called from the bottom of the stairs, where she was trying to soothe Lottie.

“Jack,” Van said gently, “it’ll end, yeah? Just a little while.”

That was their refrain, one Van had established the first time a storm like this hit—when they were young and dumb and in what you would’ve called puppy love if they were anyone other than themselves. If they didn’t have enough trauma for a lifetime at twenty-three years old.

Lottie hadn’t joined them that trip. They’d fallen asleep, drunk and hazy and relatively happy, in front of the fire in the living room and woken to a freak storm. Just like this—nothing in weather reports, very little warning. They didn’t yet know what they’d learn later—the art of watching the waves and the sky for signs.

Van had moved first, tugging Jackie to the basement door. Jackie had refused to go down the stairs. Van’d probably carried her, but she couldn’t remember the descent. All Jackie could remember was crushing panic, followed by small comfort when Van started repeating that same phrase.

It’ll end. Just a little while.

“I’m fine,” Jackie nodded. Get your shit together. “I’m coming. I’m f-fine.”

“What—” Shauna started, confusion etched on her features.

Van dropped Lottie’s elbow, headed toward the stairs, and Lottie wailed.

“No, no! Van, take care of Lottie.” Jackie took one shaky step down. “Lot, honey, it’s okay. It’s—” Jackie’s voice broke completely and her lips formed the rest of the sentence noiselessly— okay.

Shauna whipped around to Van, who reluctantly returned to Lottie’s side.

“Underground,” Van explained over her shoulder. “She doesn’t like… being underground.”

“Jax…” Shauna was a step below her, a head shorter than her.

She peered up at her, brown eyes open wide—waiting for direction. Jackie tensed. She didn’t know what she needed. She didn’t know how to guide this. She went blank for this. All Jackie wanted was for Shauna to direct her, to tell her what she had to do. She couldn’t start this on her own.

The trembling that’d been contained to Jackie’s hands had spread—her arms shaking, her upper body jolting, her legs jelly beneath her. And just like Shauna had when she was the one responsible, when there was a very different reason for Jackie’s instability, she caught Jackie around her waist, supporting her weight.

“Do you need to go slow or do you need to get this over with?”

Shauna didn’t sound unsure anymore. She was waiting for one word from Jackie so that she could take care of the rest.

Jackie wanted to say slow. She wanted to cry out the word, make it sound small and pitiful and earn Shauna’s concern and wallow in being afraid, but frenzied voices were swimming below them and Lottie was inconsolable.

“Over with,” Jackie conceded, pleading with her eyes for Shauna to force her somehow, because Jackie’s couldn’t fucking move.

Shauna nodded once. She looped her left arm tighter around Jackie’s waist and reached out with her right, prying Jackie’s fingers off of the railing. She delicately placed Jackie’s hand on her shoulder before doing the same on the other side. Jackie clutched the material of Shauna’s shirt with both hands so that she didn’t accidentally put weight on her injured shoulder. Shauna gripped her waist firmly and started walking backwards down the steps. She tugged Jackie hard enough that she couldn’t resist without making Shauna stumble backwards with the interrupted momentum.

The lamps were on—they still had power, which was a small blessing but yet another sign that there was probably an element to this storm that was less… concrete—and a dull yellow glow filled the large room. It wasn’t cramped or dark. No hard surfaces—Lottie had refinished it in a style completely unlike her usual after the first storm. Plush carpet instead of concrete or tile or anything cold, an oversized couch, throw pillows and lamps everywhere, flashlights and battery-powered lanterns rather than candles.

This wasn’t anything like the freaky fucking bunker Jackie had been forced to spend most of her time in out there.

Jackie froze on the last step, fresh panic coursing through her when Shauna stepped onto the white carpet. Shauna wrapped her arms all the way around Jackie’s waist, pulling her body close.

“Ready?” she asked, an edge of nervousness to her.

Ready?

The first time they jumped off the high dive at the community center pool, the first sip of liquor they took after Jackie poured some of her mom’s vodka into a water bottle and smuggled it to Shauna’s house, the first time they carved an apple into a makeshift pipe to smoke the shittiest weed imaginable, the first time they kissed (back when they called it practice).

Shauna waiting for Jackie to give her the go ahead.

Except Jackie wasn’t doing anything. She was sinking her nails into Shauna’s shoulders and shaking like a fucking idiot instead of just picking up her fucking feet and—

Shauna squeezed Jackie tighter and lifted her off her feet, forcing her nose into the crook of her neck immediately after setting her down.

“You’re okay,” Shauna murmured into her hair. “You’re okay.”

“Shauna?” Jackie pulled back to look her in the eyes, swaying a little when she took in the room, its lack of fucking windows or other exits or any of the things she immediately looked for whenever she entered an enclosed space.

“Yeah, baby?” Shauna’s right hand slid up, holding her ribcage to stabilize her.

“You can’t leave me,” Jackie forced the words out, admitting to herself as much as Shauna how fucking badly she needed her now. Jackie had done this before. She’d handled much worse on her own. She had Van and Lottie. But she needed Shauna now that she’d had her. “Please. Don’t leave me.”

“I won’t leave you,” Shauna kissed her, brief but firm. “I promise.”

Jackie covered Shauna’s hand with her own, interlacing their fingers and pulling their hands away from her ribs. She saw the hurt in Shauna’s eyes, the stress seeping back in. This was a sticking point for them, it would forever be one of their things. Shauna didn’t come to Jackie when she needed her most, Jackie left Shauna on her own when she was the only thing that could have helped her. Their constant cross to bear.

Jackie wanted to drag Shauna over to the couch, bury her face in her chest, and breathe her in until this fucking storm passed.

But Lottie was freaking out—frantically wringing her hands, her eyes scanning over the room again and again, words tumbling out of her in violent spurts. Van and Nat were trying to calm her down, but it wasn’t working . Jackie swallowed her panic and let go of Shauna’s hand—Shauna resisting momentarily, Jackie quickly squeezing her fist in reassurance before dropping it—before sweeping in under Van’s arm. She grabbed at Lottie’s waist.

“Lottie, honey,” Jackie shouted, squeezing her ribs, her hands directly above Nat’s. Lottie’s eyes were dilated from the meds, wet with tears. “Look at me.”

Lottie shook her head, but Jackie was not about to let her lose it, not when this was nowhere near the worst thing they’d faced in the last week. Jackie moved her hands to Lottie’s face and pushed her chin up.

“Look at me,” she repeated. She willed Lottie’s eyes to open, her breathing to slow. “It’s fine. We’re safe, okay? You’re safe.”

Lottie inhaled. Jackie felt Nat’s fingers move between their bodies, scrambling for Lottie’s hands and squeezing them tight.

“See, Jackie says it’s fine,” Natalie murmured. She pressed her nose into Lottie’s neck from behind. “It’s gotta be fine, if Jackie says so, right?”

“It’s just a storm, Lot,” Jackie said.

“Just a storm?” Taissa muttered. She sounded shaky. Jackie felt Van take a step back towards her.

“Just a storm,” Jackie repeated, trying to believe the words herself, even though there were no weather reports reflecting any of it and the waves had been skirting the shore in that way they did. It’s fine, it’s fine. She loosened her grip on Lottie’s chin and smoothed her bangs away from her eyes. “We’ve had them loads of times. It’s nothing.”

“Sure sounds like someth—” Misty started to mumble, before Nat shot her a look over Lottie’s shoulder.

“Come on, princess,” Nat said, nodding at Jackie to drop her hands. “Let’s sit down—”

“But—we didn’t—secure the house—” Lottie choked out.

She was right, of course—given how not-lucid she tended to be, Lottie could be strangely meticulous about concrete shit like property management, especially at the most inconvenient times—but they truly hadn’t had time to board up the windows. They’d barely had time to get the essentials downstairs, let alone any of Lottie’s valuable lamps or silk curtains.

“The windows and shit will be alright, Lot,” Van soothed. Jackie could hear the lie in her voice. “Any damage, we’ll just fix it, like last time—”

“That’s not what I mean,” Lottie cried.

Shauna frowned at Jackie, looking up from where she’d been sorting the mess of things they’d brought downstairs.

“Lot, you gotta tell me more,” Nat prompted. “What—”

“No,” Van shook her head sternly at Natalie, “she’s just confused. She hates these storms, they make her—”

“I am not confused!” Lottie shouted, throwing Nat’s hands off of her and raising a shaking finger at Van. “I’ve played along with this because you wanted me to, but I am not confused! I’m not crazy and how fucking dare you make me feel—”

“I’m sorry!” Van reached for Lottie, but she stepped backward, bumping into Nat, who let her hands hover inches from Lot’s sides, ready to catch her. “Lot, I’m sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t—”

Van was sick— guilt and torn allegiance written on her face, shifting her weight back and forth on the balls of her feet, moving closer to Lottie and Taissa in turn.

Shauna stood slowly, clutching Jackie's forearm and staring at her in terror. She'd realized where this was going. Misty had too, if the minute smirk on her face was any indicator.

"You know this isn't a normal fucking storm. Normal storms show up on fucking weather reports—what do your phones say right now?" Lottie stared at them pointedly. "Seriously!" she shrieked when no one moved.

Silence, then Misty filling it.

"Forty-three degrees and a… light drizzle."

"Exactly! Is that what this looks like to you?" Lottie demanded, whipping around to each of them in turn. "A light fucking drizzle?"

"Princess," Nat said carefully, "they aren't always right about this shit. I'm sure there's a reason for—"

"Van! Jackie!" Lottie snapped. Her hair was wild around her, messy from sleep and whatever had landed Natalie in her bed overnight and pure fucking distress. Shauna's grip tightened on Jackie's arm. "Are you really going to stand there and let them think this is fine? There are too many of us in one place. Doing the fucking usual when we got here clearly wasn't enough!"

"Lottie, honey, I think we need to take a minute to—" Jackie tried desperately, her throat aching from overuse.

"Burning the fucking plants wasn't enough for this!" Lottie bellowed. "I shouldn't even have to be telling you this. You fucking know. You know better."

Lottie dissolved into sobs, clutching her chest.

"Fucking hell," Nat mumbled, pulling Lottie close and sinking to the ground with her.

"What—what are you talking about?" Taissa asked.

Jackie's stomach dropped as she spun her head around.

Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck.

Tai was still, her mouth slightly open. She glanced around the room, her eyes dropping on every one of their faces. She looked bewildered, on edge, as if they were all moving in slow motion and she only just realized she was off-course.

"Tai," Van took a step towards her. "Baby—"

"No," Taissa replied, dodging her outstretched arm. "What… what do you mean?"

She stared at Van, her gaze hard. Van blinked, her head twisting slightly to the side, her eyes wide and pleading. Taissa didn't budge, her silence deafening.

"We—" Van choked, glancing at the ceiling, then the floor. She seemed twenty all over again, near tears over the thought of opening her mouth to eat, scrambling to explain Jackie's frantic cries to their neighbors. "We… Jackie and Lottie and I…"

"Spit it out," Taissa ordered.

Shauna tried to move closer to her, but Taissa backed up again, stopping only when her heels hit the baseboards.

“Tai, I really don’t think you want to know—”

“Shut up, Shauna,” Tai said firmly.

Van exhaled. “Sometimes we—we—”

Van was scrambling. She was breaking .

“We put protection spells on the house,” Jackie interrupted, rescuing her. The words fell out of her in a rush. “Just some, uh, gentle… household… witchcraft.”

“What?” Tai exclaimed. She glanced from Jackie back to Van. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“Jackie,” Shauna sighed, burying her head in her hands.

“Well, what the fuck am I supposed to do here?” Jackie snapped at her. “Tai, it isn’t anything… crazy. It’s like… we use plants that have some properties that can help ward off —”

“Oh my God,” Tai breathed. “Oh my God. Oh my God! You… you’ve been… this whole time?”

Tai’s gaze flitted between Lottie—curled up against Nat and gone to the world, her shoulders shaking with fits of tears—Van and Jackie.

“You three have just been… been fucking continuing with the woods shit?”

“Well, it didn’t quite look the same as that, if that makes you feel better!” Misty chimed in. “It seemed much more tame.”

“You knew?” Tai swallowed. “And Shauna, you said that I… you said I didn’t want to know, so… so you knew, too?

“Tai,” Shauna said softly, “I thought it was better if you didn’t have to think about that right now. I just—”

“If I didn’t have to think about it? Are you fucking kidding me?” Tai turned to face Natalie, staring down at her. “Natalie? Did you know?”

“Fuck, Taissa,” Nat murmured.

“Natalie!”

“Yeah,” she admitted sheepishly. “Misty and I saw them, but they’re telling the truth. It wasn’t anything fucking extreme and we just… didn’t wanna freak you out.”

Tai nodded, every inch of her reading as pained. She was trying to hold it together—actually, she was doing a damn good job of holding it together—but Jackie’s heart ached for her. Being lied to like that by all of them. Jackie never should’ve let them—

“Tai,” Van tried again, “please—”

“Please what?” Tai yelled, holding her hands up with her fingers outstretched in frustration. “What the fuck am I supposed to say to you right now? What more do you want from me?”

“Just let me—”

“I’m going to bed,” Tai said evenly, walking toward the bedroom off the open basement, “don’t fucking follow me.” Tai looked at Shauna first, then Van, making it clear that she was addressing them specifically.

She slammed the door shut behind her.

“Damnit, guys!” Nat whisper-yelled, extricating herself from Lottie who had fallen back asleep in her drug-induced haze. “I knew we shouldn’t have kept this shit from her!”

“We were protecting her, Natalie,” Shauna argued. “It isn’t our fault Lottie decided to freak out and spill—”

“Oh, fuck you, Shauna! You’re not her keeper,” Nat tucked Lottie under one of the throw blankets and stood. “I get that Jackie being alive is enough to stick you in a goddamn asylum and honestly? You’re coping with it better than I ever imagined your crazy ass would. But don’t act like you’ve thought about Tai for more than a fucking second this past week.”

Shauna shrank back, wrapping her arms around her stomach. Jackie rested her hand against the center of her back.

“Or ever, honestly,” Nat added. “Do you not understand how worried she gets about you? How often she’s had to put herself aside because you’re losing it, again?”

“Should we really be having this conversation,” Van said quietly, picking at her cuticles roughly, “when she can probably hear everything you’re—”

“And you! You’re just as fucking guilty, Van. Like, talk about betraying her trust,” Nat moved closer, lowering her voice, but ignored Van’s comment other than those concessions. “You didn’t tell her you had a fucking kid. Just sprung that out of nowhere! And after we swore we’d be fucking honest with each other. Did you even ask her where her kid is, now?”

Van’s face was red, her gaze cast at her feet. Jackie’s head pounded. Shame. It was fucking shameful, everything they’d concealed.

“Have any of you even thought to check in with her, or are you just too preoccupied with your own fucking crazy lies to think about anyone other than yourselves? All of you are so wrapped up in your own bullshit that you didn’t even—you didn’t even notice that I nearly fucking—”

“Natalie—” Jackie and Shauna both called her name at the same time, equal measures of desperation in their voices.

Shauna quieted when Nat glared, but Jackie kept trying.

“You’re right. I’m so sorry. We should’ve been there, we were too—”

“It doesn’t matter. This isn’t about—listen,” Nat rolled her shoulders back and stood up straighter. “Taissa cares so much. She’s always looked out for us—all of us. She isn’t perfect

but… but she fucking tries. I wouldn't—I wouldn't be here without her."

Lottie made a little noise in her sleep, something fretful and weak, and Natalie knelt next to her, brushing her bangs off of her forehead.

"None of us would. She's been good to all of us, like truly good, and we repay her with fucking lies? And yeah, it's stupid plants, whatever, but this shit freaks her out. She just had the whole… the sleepwalking dog thing, and she's spooked right now. She's exhausted and she's fucking hurt. And we did that to her. So just… just fucking think about that."

The room fell quiet when Nat did, a long pause followed by the guilty shuffle of feet and quiet murmurs as they settled in for the night. Van did go to Taissa, eventually. After she'd helped Natalie lift Lottie onto the couch and held Jackie close enough that she could feel Van's heart thudding against her ribs, Van had knocked quietly on the door, pausing for a response none of the other women could hear from where they lay, and pushed it open. She didn't come back out.

Nat held Lottie in her arms, one bicep cushioning her head, her other arm wrapped around her waist. Jackie had tucked a blanket around them while Shauna made their bed out of couch cushions, Jackie's favorite throw blanket laid atop it. Misty shifted on her own pile of cushions and Jackie heard the snap of her glasses folding.

The room was tense, the women operating in near silence after Natalie's biting commentary. She was right. Jackie felt fucking horrendous. She needed to make it better with all of them. They'd find a way to fix this—to make up for lying to Taissa, for abandoning Natalie when she was suicidal and fucking kidnapped. Jackie would find a way to fix this.

"Are you okay?" Shauna whispered.

She clutched Jackie to her chest—Jackie hadn't fought it this time when Shauna beckoned her to lay half on top of her, she'd just made sure the shoulder she rested her head against was the uninjured one. Shauna liked being the one to hold Jackie—she always had—and Jackie wanted her as content as possible with the nightmare going on around them. Shauna couldn't leave her. Not physically, of course, but especially not mentally. Jackie couldn't stare into her blank eyes down here.

"Yeah," Jackie lied softly. "I'm okay. We're gonna be okay."

Jackie stretched awake. She didn't remember drifting off—the last thing she remembered was pressing kisses to Shauna's exposed collarbone, trying to soothe her into sleep.

It was freezing. The floor was hard and cold beneath her, no cushions or plush throw lining them. No Shauna. Her body wasn't pressed against Jackie's, running warm like a furnace, and she wasn't holding her waist or her hip or her thigh. Jackie's eyes shot open.

It was dark. Too dark to actually be seeing, but she could. Jackie knew it was supposed to be pitch black, the middle of the night with no lights lit, but she could see her surroundings as though watching on a screen. Movie magic. Or maybe some other kind of magic, because Jackie opened her eyes to a wood ceiling she would recognize anywhere.

The fucking cabin.

An old dream, that's what it must've been. Her teenage self waking to watch Shauna tear down the ladder, run to her body, and scream so loud the other girls covered their ears.

Except it was different. It was dark, the dead of night, when it should've been morning, bright light reflecting off of the snow. And when Jackie sat up, some of the other girls did too. They never moved until Shauna woke them, but Van, Nat, and Lottie, all pitch-perfect depictions of their teenage selves, were rubbing their eyes and stretching and turning in their makeshift beds.

The dreams had been changing since Jackie had come back to Shauna. She tried to take in this new landscape, to gather herself before Shauna inevitably tore through the cabin. Mari and Akilah were curled around each other, foreheads pressed close, a tangle of limbs. The other girls were shadows, bodies on their blankets, but barely there. Fading in and out at the edges.

A clatter, followed by thudding. Shauna coming down. Jackie stood, readying herself to follow her out the front door, just like she always did.

Lottie sobbed behind her and Jackie whipped around. None of the other girls had ever made noise in this dream. Not until Shauna started screaming.

Lottie was scooting on her knees to one of the shadowy girls. She stopped in front of her, her whole body trembling.

"Laura Lee," she sobbed. "I—I—"

No, that wasn't right… Laura Lee shouldn't be there, she was already gone by the time—

Before Jackie could look any closer, Shauna reached the main floor.

"No, no, no," Shauna chanted quietly.

Here we go.

She was young like the rest of them, eighteen and all wide eyes and full cheeks and—not pregnant. Weird.

Shauna never saw Jackie in this dream. In the beginning, Jackie would try to shout or grab her or block her exit, but Shauna always breezed by as if Jackie wasn't there at all. Jackie couldn't stop it, so she'd learned to step aside and get it over with, letting Shauna go through the motions—sprinting in her sock feet, and—

"Jackie!" Shauna yelled, barreling into her so fast they both tumbled backward.

Jackie took a few clumsy steps until she regained her balance and could support Shauna's weight. They stood cheek to cheek, Shauna's arms locked tight around Jackie's neck, Jackie's wrapped around her waist. This was new. Unexpected. But Jackie wasn't complaining, because this was so much fucking better.

"Shauna," Jackie breathed. She caught sight of Tai climbing down the ladder over Shauna's shoulder, looking downright terrified. "I'm here. I'm—"

Shauna moved suddenly, taking Jackie's face between her hands.

Laura Lee's sweet voice floated in the background, blending with Lottie's quiet cries. "—I've missed you, too—"

"Jackie," Shauna repeated, searching her eyes quickly. "Jackie, we're… you're young, you're—we're—fuck—"

"What do you mean?" Jackie demanded, heart pounding. "What's—"

Shauna kissed her, fingers tangling desperately in her hair, and Jackie met it eagerly despite her confusion. Shauna never kissed her in her dreams. She was cold and cruel or she was brokenhearted. That was it. That was dream Shauna's whole range.

It was brief, Shauna tearing her lips away to stare into Jackie's eyes again.

"Am I going crazy?" she whispered, brushing her fingers over Jackie's lower lip just like she had the night before, after they'd learned the death dream was shared.

There was something to her. Something that felt real and current. Like her Shauna—the one Jackie promised herself was asleep and wrapped around her right now. The one who would probably wake her up any minute for fitting in her sleep.

"No, baby," Jackie assured her. "No. I'm here. I'm—"

"You're real? I mean you're actually alive? Real you," Shauna babbled, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Because if I wake up and you're not there, if you're really d-dead again, I—I won't be able—"

"Slow down," Jackie begged, slipping her hands under Shauna's sweater to soothe her bare skin. "Slow down, my love. What're you talking about?"

"I can't wake up and find out all of this has been a… a fucking delusion. I can't lose you again, not after I've had you. This," Shauna nodded to the room around them, "feels like something I'd come up with in a fucking… psychotic break. And—and you being alive after hiding for twenty-five years does, too. So tell me, Jax. Please. Are you—"

"What the fucking hell is going on?" Nat snapped to their left.

It was bizarre, the other girls interrupting like this. That never happened, even when it went off-script. The focus was always Shauna. Dream Shauna referencing what was going on now in their lives was also… fucking strange.

Jackie knew she and Shauna had shared at least one dream before. She traced a finger over one of Shauna's cheeks, fuller here than they were now, even though she was far too thin, and watched her brow furrow. Not a single wrinkle, no uneven skin where the sun had built spots of beige over the years. Jackie took Shauna in, watching as Shauna stared back at her in awe, and wondered whether this might be something shared as well.

"I'm real," Jackie kissed Shauna's cheek, pulling her into another hug. "I'm real. You're not crazy. I was gone but I'm back. It's all real. We're together and… and everything's gonna be okay."

"I wanna wake the fuck up," Shauna swallowed hard in Jackie's ear.

"Me too, baby. Me too."

22. it was all water

"So, are we all in agreement that this is… real somehow?" Nat held her hands in front of her face, staring at them in awe. "Like, we're all… us, right?"

Shauna broke her and Jackie's embrace, turning toward Nat, but she immediately secured an arm around Jackie's hips, tucking her fingers into a belt loop of Jackie's worn jeans—not what she'd been wearing when they'd fallen asleep in the basement—and gripping tight.

"I mean… I feel like we're… us, but how would—" Shauna cleared her throat, the rehearsed settling of nerves of a grown woman, of a mother, but the voice and face and body of her teenage self. "We don't really have any way of knowing whether or not this is just a dream, do we?"

"If it is a dream," Nat ran a hand through her hair—a long, blonde, messy tangle, "it's not mine."

"How—" Shauna started.

"I dream in black and white," Nat shrugged, sweeping the room with her eyes. "Shouldn't Misty be here?"

"Don't question a good thing," Shauna tried to sound like she was joking, but her voice wavered.

Jackie swallowed, covering Shauna's hand with her own. She interlaced their fingers against her hip bone and glanced down—her fucking butterfly teeshirt, one she hadn't seen since before that night in the cold, because Van and Lottie hadn't been able to bring her any of her own clothes, worried they'd draw suspicion.

"Do you have this?" she blurted suddenly, holding the hem of the tee.

"What?" Shauna asked, tearing her eyes away from Natalie to follow Jackie's gaze.

"This shirt," Jackie tugged on it, "do you… have it?"

"I—" Shauna cleared her throat again, harder this time, "yeah, I have it. I have… I kept all your clothes. Everything that didn't get used."

"She slept with it," Van said quietly, face twisted with guilt and pain. Everything about her was young again, but her scars looked as they did now—pale and flat, not the red ridges they'd been when they were fresh. "When we were… out there, at least."

Shauna tensed against Jackie.

"At home, too," she mumbled. "For a… long time."

Jackie's heart broke a little more—she'd started envisioning it every time she learned something new about the pain she'd caused Shauna. She could see a heart—anatomical, all the proper valves and atriums—sitting on a pedestal in a little clear box. A museum case. It was ceramic, rather than meat and muscle, and every time she felt her heart breaking she saw

it, too. The case would open and some invisible force would carry a hammer and a long metal pin inside and bang—a tiny piece would be chipped away, falling to join the pile of dust and jagged fragments that coated the bottom of the display.

Jackie kissed Shauna's cheek to soothe the sting in her chest.

"I think we should treat it like it is something… real," Van sighed. "Just in case."

She looked exhausted, watching Lottie embrace Laura Lee. They were on their knees, bodies pressed together, arms wrapping tight, chins tucked on each other's shoulders.

"I want out of this shithole," Nat rolled her shoulders back. "It's creeping me the fuck out."

"Why is no one else waking up?" Shauna asked distractedly, eyeing the rest of the girls. They slept heavily, so clearly unrousable. "Why just… Laura Lee?"

Laura Lee and Lottie appeared to remain in their own world—whispering quietly, unphased by the mention of Laura Lee's name.

"Move!" Van yelled suddenly, eyes wide and fixed on something behind them.

She jumped over Mari and Akilah's legs to reach Jackie and Shauna, but Shauna was already pulling Jackie blindly forward with such force it threatened to knock her over. Shauna stabilized her and Van gripped her upper arm. Shauna found Jackie's hand instead of her waist, holding it so tightly it hurt, and swung them around.

A shadow was spreading behind them, or maybe not a shadow, maybe nothingness? Jackie couldn't tell, but something told her that they didn't want to be caught in it. It had swallowed the wall of the cabin Jackie and Shauna had been nearest to before Van called out—painting the wood pitch black and taking a few of the sleeping girls with it.

"What the fuck is that?" Nat snapped, automatically bending her knees to take a grounded stance, as though she might have to swing at it.

Jackie backed up further, falling in next to Van against the wall and dragging a stunned Shauna with her.

"Fuck if I know!" Van called back. "Tai, come—where the fuck—"

Van looked around wildly, spinning in circles so frantic her hair whipped behind her and brushed Jackie's cheek.

"She was just here!" Van screamed. "Just a fucking second ago, she—Taissa!"

"No," Shauna muttered under her breath, shaking her head. "No, no—"

"It's okay," Jackie said quickly, panic rising in her chest. "I'm sure she's okay. This isn't… this is… maybe she just woke up already? Misty isn't here, so we must just be asleep, right?"

"What's the plan?" Nat clambered over to them, joining them against the wall on Van's other side. "Door's open, maybe she went through it?"

Jackie craned her neck to check, trying to tune out the sound of Shauna's muttering and the pain of Shauna's nails digging into her hand and the fear of Shauna going away right now.

The door was open, cracked about a foot. Light shone bright from the outside, which didn't make sense because hadn't it been night when they got here?

The darkness was moving at a consistent rate, only a few feet between it and Laura Lee's makeshift bed in the center of the room.

"Lottie, honey," Jackie stretched her free hand out towards her and Shauna whimpered. "Come on, sweetie. Come over here with us, okay?"

Lottie shook her head. She clung tighter to Laura Lee, squeezing the fabric of her white nightgown between shaking fingers.

"Taissa!" Van called again, stepping forward. Jackie and Nat both flung their arms out in front of her, blocking her path. "Let me—"

"No!" Jackie shrieked. She dug her fingers into Van's shoulder. "No. If she was just next to you she's not… over there, okay?"

"Footprints!" Natalie yelled suddenly, leaning to peer out the door. "There's… snow and I see prints, Van. She went out, yeah? Just—"

"We should follow," Shauna said quietly, jerking her head toward the door. Jackie let out a sigh of relief—both for Taissa not having been… swallowed or… whatever happened when the black took you and for Shauna forming real, audible words. "We should get out of here and—and make sure she's—"

"Lot—" Nat took half a step forward, but Van cut her off with her foot. "Come on, princess. I know… I know this fucking sucks, but—"

Lottie stared at them from over Laura Lee's shoulder, her too-young eyes impossibly large, tears flooding her cheeks. The darkness kept rolling forward, swallowing Mari and Akilah up.

"Lottie," Van tried softly, "I know, honey, but—"

"You guys need to get out," Lottie's lip trembled as she spoke. "You have to get out of here before—"

"I'm not going anywhere without you!" Nat screamed. "So come here and—"

"You have to go get Taissa," Lottie locked eyes with Van, addressing her directly. "You have to go. Now. She isn't safe."

"Lottie, what are you—" Nat cried, shoulders shaking like they had when Jackie watched her sob the night before—Travis is gone and Lottie is crazy and Tai is never there. Van had her in a tight grip around the middle, throwing her weight back to stop her from moving forward. "Van, get the fuck off—"

"You're coming, too," Van said sternly, tears shining in her eyes. "Lottie, you're not leaving me. You're not abandoning us."

"I'm—I'm right behind you, just…" Lottie sobbed into Laura Lee's shoulder, "I'm taking every s-second I can, okay? But you have to go now."

Van dragged Nat back, closer to the door, and flung it wide open.

“Jack—” she pleaded.

“I’ve got her!” Jackie promised. “I’ve got her. Go.”

Shauna broke skin—Jackie felt hot blood trail down her hand. Van nodded and in seconds she was gone, Nat forced out with her. Jackie glanced out the door—more footprints in the snow, as well as drag marks from the heels of Nat’s boots, reaching as far as she could see, but no sign of any of the women. It was like they’d vanished the second they stepped over the threshold. Jackie held her breath, hoping this was the right fucking move, hoping that Van and Nat and Tai hadn’t just walked into a different kind of nothingness, that they’d all wake the fuck up soon.

“Jackie!” Shauna yelped.

The darkness was inches from Lottie’s feet. Laura Lee spoke in her ear—something Jackie couldn’t hear—and Lottie shook her head violently.

Jackie surged forward, prying one of Lottie’s hands off of Laura Lee’s back. Shauna let out a primal shriek, pulling on Jackie so hard pain shot through her shoulder. Laura Lee stood calmly, helping Lottie rise to her feet, and turned to smile warmly at Jackie. Jackie wanted to touch her, to caress her cheek or brush back her silky hair and see if she felt real, but she couldn’t drop Lottie’s wrist and Shauna’s grip on her other hand was unbreakable.

“Jackie!” Shauna screamed. “Jackie, we’ve gotta fucking go! Please!”

“It’s time now,” Laura Lee went on tiptoe to kiss Lottie’s forehead, holding her cheeks between her hands. Lottie’s entire body shook violently.

“I want to stay,” she wailed. “Please! I want to stay with you.”

Laura Lee spun them around—positioning Lottie closest to the door and herself closest to the blackness.

Shauna dropped Jackie’s hand and Jackie took the unexpected opportunity, surging forward enough to grab the back of Lottie’s shirt. Shauna moved like lightning, her arms wrapping around Jackie’s waist from behind.

“We gotta go!” Shauna heaved backwards, the pressure of her arms under Jackie’s ribcage taking her breath away.

Jackie’s feet slipped out from under her, Shauna dragging her like Van had dragged Natalie moments ago, like she had dragged Shauna decades ago.

“Lottie!” Jackie tugged as hard as she could and Lottie stumbled backwards with them. “We have to! We have to!”

Darkness washed over Laura Lee.

Lottie screamed.

Jackie pulled.

Shauna threw her weight back.

And, by some miracle, the three of them fell over the threshold together.

Jackie gasped awake—back in her own body, her current body, still half on top of Shauna, gripping her shirt between tense fingers.

Thank God, thank God, thank—

Shauna bolted upright, lifting Jackie into a sitting position as she went.

“Jackie,” she breathed, her voice pure relief, her hands digging into Jackie’s back and holding her close to her chest.

Fuck.

Jackie saw Nat and Lottie rise together, their heads peeking up over the back of the couch they’d been sleeping on. Lottie’s hair was a tangled mess—Nat swept enough of it out of her face to kiss her, brief and firm. The door at the top of the stairs was open, the sound of the storm in full force again—groaning wood, a dull thrum of wind, the pounding of the heavy rain. Shauna stood suddenly, pulling Jackie to her feet.

Goddamnit.

“Taissa!” Van shouted from the bedroom.

A second later she was in the main room with them, bolting halfway up the stairs.

Shit.

“The back door is open!” Van screamed. “She’s fucking out there!”

She tumbled back down to dig frantically through the pile of shoes Shauna had made by the foot of the stairs.

“Okay, just—Van, hold on, we need to think about—” Jackie searched for the right words as she spoke, desperate to keep Van from doing something stupid and reckless.

Smack— the cellar door hitting the wall as it flung open, Misty standing just inside the frame.

“What’s going on?” she yelled to be heard over the ambient noise of this hellscape. “I heard yelling!”

“Where were you?” Nat demanded.

She’d joined Van, her boots already on, and she was pulling a sweatshirt over her head. Shauna was on their heels, slipping her feet into tennis shoes. Jackie started rummaging for her own clothes, hands shaking violently, mind absolutely spinning.

“I was just catching up on the Reddit boards,” Misty walked to them uncertainly. Lottie was the only one left sitting, her trembling arms wrapped around her knees. “I didn’t want to wake anyone with the light from my laptop, but there’s some new—”

“Did you see her?” Van interrupted, gripping Misty’s shoulders, staring at her with wide unblinking eyes.

“I—I—what?” Misty stuttered.

“Did you see Taissa?” Van shook Misty as she spoke. “You were awake, did you see—”

“No!” Misty yelped. “No, I was in the—is she gone? She can’t have gone far, it’s—”

“Fuck!” Van released Misty and she stumbled back a step.

“Let’s go,” Nat took Van by the elbow and started toward the stairs. “Lot, stay put!” she called over her shoulder.

They were the most dressed of any of them, but it still wasn’t enough. Jackie saw the sleeve of Van’s Carhartt sticking out and lunged for it, yanking it from under the heaping pile of clothing.

“Van!” Jackie tossed it at her and she caught it, pulling it on as she went. “We’re right behind you.”

“Jackie, you and Lottie should just stay here,” Shauna said forcefully, pulling a hoodie over her head. “You can take care of her and—”

Misty was piling sweaters on, every color of the goddamn rainbow flying over her curls. Lottie stood shakily the second Nat was far enough up the stairs that she wouldn’t notice. She looked haunted— her cheeks tear-soaked, her eyes hollow.

“I’m not staying here,” Jackie zipped her coat up to her chin, “while you go out into a storm on a beach you’re not even familiar with! Are you insane?”

“Yes, actually,” Shauna was so earnest in delivery it sent a shock of pain through Jackie’s entire body. “I am insane. And I need you to fucking stay inside. Please.”

“Lottie and I know the beach, Shauna,” Jackie said gently, kneeling to slip her feet into her boots. “You need us. It’s gonna be okay.”

“No! No, I’m not letting you—”

“You can’t control me, Shauna!” Jackie snapped. Shauna jumped, balling her hands into fists at her sides. Tears welled in her eyes. Jackie softened. “You’re not gonna be able to put me in a box and lock me up to keep me safe.”

Shauna screwed up her face, squeezing her eyes shut like she’d just been hit.

“I know you want to, baby,” Jackie finished lacing her boot and stood up straight, offering Shauna her hand. “I know. But you can’t.”

Shauna took her hand, a grimace still on her face, and led her to the staircase. She looked pale. Sick. Jackie knew she would’ve argued more if she wasn’t so desperate to find Tai.

“We’ll gather supplies,” Misty sounded exhilarated, tossing a bag over her shoulder. “Blankets and anything else we might need. We’ll be right out!”

“Okay, Misty!” Shauna yelled back, not pausing as she guided Jackie up the stairs. “Great.”

“Jackie.”

Jackie and Shauna both froze, turning to look down at Lottie. She looked haphazardly thrown together—one foot bare and one in an unlaced sneaker, her pink jacket zipped

unevenly—but everything about her—her tone, her eyes, her posture—seemed the most lucid it had in days.

"You're going to find her. Trust yourself."

It was freezing, and Jackie didn't use that term lightly. The actual temperature couldn't have been that low—rain was pelting them, rather than snow or ice—but between Jackie's clothes, sopping wet and sticking to her body, and the wind, it was miserable. She tried to control her shivers, tensing her muscles against them or moving strategically to mask them, because Shauna was on the edge.

She clung to Jackie's hand, her fingers occasionally grazing over sore spots where Jackie's skin was broken (the same spots Shauna's nails had dug in during their dream, but Jackie tried not to think too hard about that). The wind blew up the shore, from the waves toward the house, and the only saving grace was that the rain had wet the sand enough that it couldn't lift off the ground and dance around them. Still, they sank some in the deep banks as they pushed through it.

The cliff down to the shore was rocky and steep—they'd needed to use a hand to balance as they lowered themselves down, which had meant Shauna had to let go of Jackie in order to maintain her grip on the flashlight they'd snagged as they ran out. She'd lit Jackie's path, so focused on Jackie's footholds and movements, that Jackie had worried she would slip. She was sort of… amazing though—scaling it like it was nothing. Sure of her body, as if she had no doubts she'd catch herself.

By the time Jackie and Shauna had started down, Van and Nat were small figures near the foot of the cliff. The rain was so thick they lost track of them during their own descent, breaking straight for the waves on Jackie's insistence. Jackie was determined to get them to the water. Partly because she felt drawn there and partly because the worst place a sleepwalking Taissa could've gone ought to be the first place they checked.

Shauna muttered under her breath. Jackie could see her lips moving when she glanced sideways at her, but she couldn't hear anything over the roar of the wind. Lightning kept striking and Jackie hadn't even heard a single discernible clap of thunder.

"Shauna?" she yelled, turning to send her voice directly toward Shauna's ear, her hair thrashing in her face.

Shauna whipped toward Jackie, eyes wide—matching brown saucers, lit so dully by the moon and the stray flashes of lightning that Jackie wasn't sure if she was seeing them or imagining them.

"Say something," Jackie begged. "Just… I need to know you're with me."

Shauna opened her mouth wider. Water trailed down her face—rolling droplets that Jackie could see glinting in the light. Before Shauna could respond, something hit Jackie's stomach hard. Unable to keep her footing, she slammed flat on her back. The wind pushed against her mouth and nose at a strange angle and it was like she was stuck on one of those carnival rides she'd always hated—the ones that send you up and down or around in a circle so quickly the air doesn't move the right way to actually breathe it in and Jackie had never understood how

everyone else just seemed to know how to breathe anyway, when she spent the entire time gasping and choking and—

"Jackie!" Shauna's voice was loud in her ear. Her hands were on Jackie, holding her shoulders. Her face was so close that Jackie felt her presence there, too—a warm spot on her cheek, wet hair heavy against her neck. "Jackie, open your eyes. You're okay, you're okay, you're—"

Jackie grunted, forcing her eyes open. Shauna hovered over her, the flashlight dropped next to them so that its light focused between their bodies, catching fragments of them both. Shauna's nose was less than a foot from Jackie's, rainwater running down her bottom lip as it jutted out in a horrified pout. Jackie pressed a hand to her stomach gingerly, wincing at the tenderness.

"What—"

"A branch," Shauna explained. "Are you okay?"

Lightning flashed again. Shauna glanced toward the water anxiously before returning her attention to Jackie.

"Yeah," Jackie wheezed, propping herself up on an elbow, fighting to find an angle where she could inhale. "Help me up."

Shauna pulled her upright, lifting more of Jackie's weight than she'd expected her to, her feet hovering off the ground for a second. She could breathe again, at least. Her stomach ached, but there was no sharp pain, nothing immediately concerning.

"Are you sure you can keep going?"

Shauna held the flashlight between them, lighting their faces from the bottom up—backyard sleepovers and the only girl scout camping trip they actually went on (before Jackie quit and Shauna followed suit), little girls telling ghost stories. The rest of Shauna's half-undone braid gave out with another strong gust of wind, the tie carried off with it. Her hair whipped around her face, covering and uncovering her features. She flickered like candlelight behind the swaths of brunette—so wet it was almost black—and the unsteady beam of light that shook with her hand.

"Because you could stay right here and I could come—"

"Shauna!" Jackie screamed, pointing over her shoulder.

A figure in the darkness. Jackie couldn't even make out the individual waves of the ocean, she could only discern it as a whole (a Monet painting, some strange part of her mind recalled from 1995, movie popcorn and Shauna's rolled eyes and Alicia Silverstone's face)—but she could see her somehow, wading straight into the fucking water. The flash of movement catching her eye or a reflection of the moon off of her skin or… or something, but it was Taissa. Jackie was sure of it.

Shauna spun around quickly, gripping Jackie's hand and following the line of her raised finger with the beam of light.

"Where?" she asked frantically, stumbling forward a few steps. "Jax, I don't see anything, where—"

“Just follow me!” Jackie launched herself forward, tugging Shauna’s hand.

They walked quicker than they had since they reached the beach. Then they jogged. Then they ran.

They moved in sync—left foot, right foot, falling in time. They ran like they had when they were kids—learning to match the thudding of their tennis shoes against the track when they did laps, tearing across the field in tandem during sprints—until Shauna had realized that she was faster than Jackie, that she could take six strides to Jackie’s five, that she could reach the finish line before her.

Shauna didn’t outrun Jackie, even though Jackie was sure she still could’ve. She didn’t allow herself to move a half-step ahead or fall a half-step behind. Jackie knew she wasn’t keeping a steady pace—her chest still sharp and her stomach still aching—but Shauna matched her without fail.

Until she could see Tai, too.

Just a few feet from the lapping waves, Shauna shrieked.

“Taissa! Taissa!”

Desperate, painful pleas.

Tai didn’t turn around. She walked with her back to them—graceful as ever, steady and level, like the waves weren’t crashing up to her hips. She didn’t seem real. She was as good as walking on water in Jackie’s mind, pushing through the ocean—freezing, ragged, fitful—like it was nothing.

Holy fuck.

Jackie understood why Lottie had taken Tai’s sleepwalking as otherworldly. As divine. Jackie wasn’t sure she thought it actually was, but fuck did it look like it.

Shauna’s hand dipped. By the time Jackie looked down, she was standing back up already, her shoes slipped off and tossed aside. She took Jackie’s face between both hands, the flashlight abandoned on the ground next to her sneakers. Jackie could see her, inches away, less clearly than she’d seen Taissa from yards away and it didn’t make any fucking sense.

“Jackie,” Shauna was crying. Jackie couldn’t tell from her face—shrouded in dark and slick with water anyway—but she could hear it in her voice. “You’re gonna stay right here, okay? You have your phone, right? For a flashlight?”

Jackie’s lip trembled.

Shauna couldn’t go out there. They’d find another way to call Tai back. There had to be another way. She couldn’t. She couldn’t. She—

“Do you have your phone?” Shauna yelled, squeezing Jackie’s cheeks tighter.

“I—I—y-yes,” Jackie reached for it, flipping on the flashlight and holding it up for Shauna to see. It was almost useless, but it let her see six inches in front of herself. Better than nothing. “But you can’t—”

“Good. Good, okay,” Shauna nodded. “You keep that on and you stay right here. Do not move , do you understand me?”

“You need help, you can’t—”

“Jackie!” Shauna sobbed. “I need you to be here in case something… happens. We can’t both go out there, no one knows where we are.”

“But—”

“I need you to just… stay here no matter what you see, okay?” Shauna swiped her thumbs over Jackie’s cheeks and Jackie snapped, sobs overtaking her. “You stay right fucking here until the others find you.”

Jackie nodded once, because Shauna was right, technically. They couldn’t both go out there, but there was no way in hell she’d stand on the shore and watch if Shauna was in danger. If both she and Tai were going to… she’d stay put, but not for that. She couldn’t do that.

One nod was all it took. Shauna was off, the proper flashlight illuminating her path, her feet pounding so hard and fast that even the sand here—dense, fully bogged down—flew up in chunks behind her.

Tai kept walking, the water to her waist and she was tall, taller than Shauna, who was impossibly close already. She hadn’t taken enough layers off in her haste. She was going to be weighed down by the heavy fabric.

“Van! Natalie!” Jackie shouted, waving her useless fucking flashlight above her head. “Please get here. Please fucking get here.”

Jackie lasted all of a minute. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t wait. She couldn’t watch like this.

She unlaced her boots blindly, eyes trained on Shauna, who had waded up to her thighs. Jackie kicked them off and started on her layers—jacket unzipped and tossed aside, sweater pulled over her head quicker than a blink so that she didn’t lose sight of them.

“Van!” she screamed at the top of her lungs, even though it was futile, even though there was no way she could hear her, no way for Jackie to know she was even okay right now. “Van, for the fucking love of God! Va—”

Movement in her peripheral vision, cutting through the sheets of rain, a flash of red. She reluctantly took her eyes off of Shauna, water lapping against her stomach, and Taissa, waves crashing against her chest.

Thank God.

Van and Nat tumbled toward her. She couldn’t make out their faces, but she knew the way they ran. They’d seen her—their arms raised and waving, their feet cutting the shortest path to where Jackie stood.

Jackie had done what she’d agreed to—she’d waited until the others found her. She turned back toward the ocean and ran.

It was even colder than she'd imagined. Between the rain and the salt water spray, Jackie felt like she was standing under a waterfall, but somehow everything was brighter out there. Maybe it was the moon reflecting off of the waves, maybe it was something else. Either way, Jackie was grateful for whatever the fuck it was that allowed her to keep eyes on them. There was a sting deep in her chest and her head pounded violently, but somehow she made it. Shauna had her arms tight around Tai's shoulders, her neck really, and was trying to pull her back toward the shore.

"Taissa," Shauna sputtered, coughing against the water that bobbed up to her neck. "Wake up! Tai, you have to—"

"Shauna!" Jackie choked out, touching her back beneath the water.

Shauna yelped in surprise and Jackie pushed forward to her side.

"Jackie!" she screamed. "I told you to—"

"Van and Nat saw me go in," Jackie said quickly. "Where do you want me? What can I—"

"Go back!" Shauna's hair hung over her cheeks, her face bright red. "Go!"

Tai surged forward, dragging Shauna a few inches deeper. Jackie slipped around them, standing on her tiptoes in front of Tai and taking her freezing cheeks between her hands. Taissa's glassy eyes were fixed far beyond Jackie.

"Jackie!" Shauna begged. "Get back! Get—"

"Tai!" Jackie ignored Shauna. "Taissa, honey, wake up!"

Tai didn't react, she just kept trying to push forward. Jackie reached down and felt for her waist, gripping hard under her ribs.

"Shauna, pull back!" Jackie met Shauna's terrified eyes. "Pull back and I'll push!"

Shauna nodded, her pretty face twisted into a grimace.

"One—" Shauna called, "two—" Jackie dug her fingers into Tai's sides harder, "three!"

They stumbled but managed to keep everyone upright. The water was around their shoulders instead of their chins and something in Taissa had shifted. Her eyes were wide with fear instead of fixed determination.

"What—" she cried, her face impossibly young, wide and open. "What are—where are—"

"Tai," Shauna sobbed in relief. Jackie let out a shaky breath. Awake. She's awake. "It's okay. It's okay. Let's go. We've gotta go."

Jackie eyed the distance they needed to travel to get back to the beach and caught two bobbing figures. Van and Natalie were halfway to them, fighting the waves as they ran.

"I can't—I'm—I'm stuck," Tai gasped out, choking on wet coughs. "I can't—my leg, there's something—"

Shauna tried to yank her back again and she yelped. Jackie could feel her trying to step back, so close to her that their knees knocked against each other, but one of Tai's legs wasn't moving.

“Wait,” Jackie yelled. “Hold on, she’s caught on something!”

Jackie used her foot to feel the area around them and jerked instinctively when her calf grazed something slimy. Tai muttered under her breath—not fully with them yet, terrified and confused— and Shauna spoke in her ear, her voice calm and steady.

“She’s stuck on… fucking seaweed or something, just—hold on, don’t pull her again. Give me a second.”

“Jackie, what are you—”

Jackie took a deep breath in and squeezed her eyes shut, sinking under the water before she had to hear Shauna’s objections. She kept her left hand on Tai’s waist to anchor herself, reaching down with her right to feel blindly for whatever was trapping her. Her fingers hooked under it—slippery and thick, like a rope wound tight around the middle of Tai’s leg.

Jackie tried breaking it but it wouldn’t give. She dropped Tai’s waist so that she could slide it down with both hands. She’d gotten it to Tai’s ankle, almost free, when she felt a tug on her shoulder.

Shauna. She yanked on Jackie, trying to force her up. Jackie knew she was terrifying her, she knew this would hurt Shauna, but she was so fucking close and letting Taissa fucking drown would undo all of them completely, so really the only option was jerk away from Shauna and sink further to untether Tai and—

Yes. Tai was loose. Her leg kicked out when it was released and Jackie started to rise, but the water crashed harder than it had since they waded into it, shoving her backwards and filling her lungs. No part of her was touching anything solid—it was all water, cold and sharp and stinging the cuts on her hand from Shauna’s nails and the scratches on her arms and legs that she hadn’t even realized she’d gotten during the fucking chaos of this week and—

Air.

Jackie coughed hard, clinging to Shauna, who was lifting her in her arms.

Water spilled out of her mouth every time she tried to breathe out, she felt like she was drowning every time she tried to breathe in. Jackie could feel Shauna speaking to her more than hear it—her ears and nose and mouth plugged by the salt water and the muck of God knows what else was beneath the waves.

Shauna had her in a bridal carry, most of her weight still being supported by the water. Van and Nat were in front of them, half-guiding, half-lifting Tai to shallower waters. Black pressed in on Jackie and she couldn’t tell whether it was the darkness of the night settling over them or a warning that she was going to lose consciousness but, when she tried to look at Shauna’s face, violently clear images of Laura Lee being swallowed into nothingness flooded her vision instead.

As soon as they were in shallow enough water that her body was hit by a rush of cold air, Jackie squirmed in Shauna’s arms, desperate to throw her weight forward, to force this shit out of her lungs. Shauna seemed to understand, helping guide her to her feet instead of resisting like Jackie feared she might. (Jackie also hadn’t forgotten, even now, the pang of guilt she’d felt every time she unintentionally made Shauna’s shoulder hurt just a little bit worse.)

Jackie's toes sank into the sand and Shauna held her hips firmly, supporting her weight as she bent forward to gag and retch and hack until the last of the water finally spilled out of her mouth, burning the open cut on her lip where Shauna had bit into her. She couldn't tell how much was expelled from her lungs and how much she'd swallowed and vomited back up, but she could breathe again. It was painful—her breaths were jagged, her throat was raw—but she could breathe.

"Say something, Jackie," Shauna pressed her cheek to Jackie's from behind her. "Just say something so I know you're—"

"M'okay," Jackie croaked as loudly as she could. She took a deep breath and covered Shauna's hands with her own. "I'm okay."

"You all need to rinse off and change into something dry and warm," Misty snapped.

She hovered at the foot of the bed, her stethoscope hanging around her neck, and she'd peeled off her sweaters to reveal her sleep shirt—a purple button-up with cartoon illustrations of various birds. Neither she or Lottie had gone into the water. They'd driven the shitty van down to the beach, taking the single lane road the two miles from the house to the small access point and rolling straight onto the sand.

They'd been waiting outside the idling vehicle, towels piled in their arms, when the other women had broken out of the waves. Van and Nat had carried Tai, Misty rushing forward to wrap her up and help lift her into the trunk, the back row of seats folded down so that Van and Misty could stay with her. Lottie had helped Shauna with Jackie, urging her to climb in first and supporting Jackie's back while Shauna lifted her into her lap.

Lottie had sank into the seat next to them, reaching back occasionally to rest a hand on Van's shoulder, brushing Jackie's hair off her cheeks as she'd snuggled into Shauna—exhausted, fighting sleep because she needed to make sure Taissa was going to be okay and because Misty had instructed her to stay awake until she could assess her and Shauna had taken that shit to heart. Shauna's attention had been split as Nat drove them back to the house—glancing at Tai, firing questions at Misty, and making sure Jackie was conscious against her. Jackie had tracked her movements the best she could, her stare alternating between Shauna's dilated eyes and Taissa's head peeking just barely under the swaddle of Van's Carhartt jacket.

(The storm had broken suddenly as they drove, calmed all they way down to a light drizzle and a brisk breeze by the time they'd clambered into the house.)

Lottie stood at Misty's side, her hair pulled back, sleeves rolled up, and hands clasped in front of her—waiting for direction. Taissa was propped up on two stacked pillows in the center of the bed in her and Van's room. Jackie had been distracted by Shauna and Lottie fussing over her but, as far as she knew, Misty had helped Van strip Tai out of her wet pajamas before they lifted her into the bed. Her hair was wrapped in a towel and she was in dry clothes. She kept trying to sit up, muttering incoherently, deathly fear in her eyes.

Shauna eyed Tai fretfully, but she was laser-focused on getting Jackie dry (completely ignoring her own shivering). Jackie let Shauna get her into one of the plush robes hanging on

the back of the door before shoving her away so that they could both rush to Tai's side.

Van and Shauna hadn't dried off at all. Their hair was plastered to their foreheads and necks, their clothes dripped onto the bed. They sat on either side of Taissa, Shauna keeping one hand on Tai and one on Jackie, who perched at her side, as if letting go of either of them might kill her.

"She's right," Nat agreed. Her hair was damp rather than dripping. She wore some of Taissa's sweats that'd been left in the room when she and Van had rushed to the basement. "The three of you need to take care of yourselves or nurse Misty's gonna have a full fucking hospital ward of idiots to take care of."

"Besides," Misty added, "you're not helping her if you get her wet again. And I need to be able to examine her."

Van laid a blanket across her chest before pulling Tai close. Tai didn't resist, her cheek flat against Van and her head tucked under her chin.

"They're coming for her," Tai mumbled quietly. "They're coming to do it over. They want to do it over."

"Taissa," Shauna said softly, rubbing her back, "you're okay. Everything's okay. Nobody's __"

Tai twisted her head to look at Shauna, gripping her forearm suddenly. Jackie jumped, leaning forward with a sharp urge to pull Taissa away from Shauna, despite herself. She'd never seen this before.

"Baby, stop," Van cried, her voice the sound of Jackie's racing heart. "It's alright—"

Seeing Tai so undone like this, so cryptic and destructive and unconcerned with those around her, was terrifying. So completely unlike her. Jackie settled for touching Tai's side, ready to intervene if she needed to, hoping to provide some small amount of comfort with the same motion if she could.

"Shauna, they're coming for her. They want to use her. They want to recreate it and they need her—"

"Who do they need?" Lottie asked sharply, jumping forward and resting her hands on Tai's shins. "Who are they coming for, Tai?"

"They're not going to get the one they want," Tai shook her head violently, flinging the towel off. Her hair whipped both Shauna and Van in the face as they leaned over her. "They're not going to get her, so they're going to take the next best thing."

"Who, Taissa?" Lottie demanded. She shook Tai, pushing down on her knees. "Focus! Who—"

"Enough!" Van cradled Tai's head back to her chest, glaring at Lottie. Tai released Shauna's arm and sank into Van's grasp, her movements slow and machine-like. "Enough. That's enough."

"Van, we need to know if there's danger coming—"

“Lottie,” Shauna spat, rubbing wider circles against Taissa’s back, “shut the fuck up.”

“Tai… who are they?” Jackie swallowed down the grit in her throat. “Do you know that part? Who is coming?”

Van and Shauna fixed Jackie with twin looks of shocked disappointment. She ignored them, leaning closer to Tai and stroking her thumb back and forth against her side. She shivered beneath Jackie’s hand, her gaze elsewhere.

“They’re nobodies,” Tai whimpered—the sleepy voice of a scared child. She didn’t lift her head from Van’s chest. “They’re obsessed. Just obsessed.”

“She’s just confused. This is—”

“With who?” Jackie interrupted Shauna.

“With us,” Tai answered with a sigh, her eyes fluttering shut. She relaxed against Van, the tension visibly leaving her muscles.

Jackie blinked and she was asleep. Her deep breaths were punctuated by little coughs, but she wasn’t stirring anymore. The concern eased out of her features, leaving her almost serene—aside from dark circles under her eyes and a long scratch across her cheek—as Van held her tighter.

“Shit,” Lottie mumbled under her breath, pulling her hands away from Tai and threading them through her own hair.

Jackie met her eyes and they both frowned. Any other time, Van would’ve been with them. If it weren’t for her understandably single-minded focus on Taissa, Jackie knew she would’ve pushed for more information, taken this ominous fucking warning seriously, shot at them the same horrified looks they were wearing. But Van was busy, elbowing Misty and her grubby hands away from Taissa, which left Lottie and Jackie isolated in their weariness. Van was the glue between them—she always had been. It was rare that Jackie and Lottie were in this sort of… paranormal, spiritual, witchy space alone together.

“Let Misty check her out, Van,” Natalie begged. Her hands replaced Lottie’s on Tai’s ankles, pulling socks over her bare feet. “She’s a fucking nurse, she’s better than nothing.”

“Wow,” Misty clucked her tongue, “better than nothing. That’s one way to put years of training and experience.”

“Misty, that’s not what I—”

“No, no,” Misty sniffed, “I get it. Old impressions and the like. I promise, I’m just going to listen to her lungs.”

Suddenly, Jackie burst into a coughing fit so hard she was forced to double over, clutching her stomach and wheezing for air. She shivered, cursing herself for letting that happen in front of Shauna, who rubbed between her shoulder blades frantically.

“Nat, can you please take Jackie and get her warmed up?”

Jackie tried to interrupt, to insist that she was fine, but trying to speak only made her sputter more.

“No, Shauna,” Nat insisted, “I can’t. Because this is fucking ridiculous. You and Jackie got just as fucking drenched as Tai did. So you need to trust that we also fucking care about Tai and will take care of her, and go warm your own asses up.”

Jackie’s coughing slowed, leaving her to fight for ragged breaths through chattering teeth.

“I’m fi—”

“Jack!” Van reached across Taissa with one hand, resting it against Jackie’s cheek. ‘I need you to go get warmed up. Should she, like, shower Misty? Or… or is more water bad?’ Van swallowed violently, glancing down at Tai’s face. “I can’t even think right now, I’m—”

“She’s conscious and lucid. There’s no reason she shouldn’t take a warm shower as long as she isn’t completely unsupervised,” Misty shrugged, trying (unsuccessfully) to find a spot to join them on the bed. “All of you should get clean, really. Saltwater is bad for skin integrity and if any of you get sick from inhaling it, your wound healing will be slowed already, so—”

“Lottie, will you—”

“Yeah right, Shauna,” Lottie crossed her arms. “As if I’m gonna stick your fucking girlfriend in the tub. No thanks, I’d rather not be on the receiving end of that freak out.”

“We’ve got her,” Nat said—firm, but kinder than Jackie was used to her being with Shauna.

“Please,” Van mumbled. She shifted Taissa slightly in her arms and stared directly at Shauna. “I can’t handle both of them… I just need you to take her.”

“You too, Palmer,” Nat rested a hand on Van’s shoulder, squeezing when Van started to shake her head. “You at least gotta change out of these fucking clothes. You don’t even have to leave the room.”

A wave of coughs hit Jackie again, but Misty’s chiming voice cut through it.

“During natural disasters, healthcare workers use an emergency team system. There’s the initial responders, the ones who are there when disaster hits. That’s you guys. You’re the A team.”

“Misty, what—”

“But when the initial disaster is over,” Misty pressed on, “the B team comes in while the A team recovers. It’s time for us to switch.”

Misty sounded alarmingly reasonable, which is how Jackie knew the rest of them were being completely irrational. Of course they needed to take care of themselves, of course the others could handle Tai briefly while they did so, but leaving her, taking eyes off of her—sleeping, beautiful, miraculously safe—felt like a huge feat to Jackie, so it must’ve felt next to impossible for Shauna and Van.

“Right,” Nat clapped her hands, “that’s it. Here’s what’s gonna happen. Van, you get up and dry off properly and get your ass in clean clothes. I’ll trade you places. I’ve got her.”

Van sighed heavily, defeat twisting her features, and tucked her nose against Tai’s forehead.

“Shauna and Jackie, you two go to the master bathroom and clean up. Then Misty can actually get close enough to examine Tai or whatever and Lottie will be right here if we need more hands,” Nat continued sternly while Van reluctantly loosened her grip on Taissa. “If Jackie gets all… sickly or starts to really hack up a lung or something, we’re close enough to hear you if you yell.”

Shauna looked torn—terrified and sick and grimacing with Van as Tai whimpered upon transfer, Nat hushing her softly. Jackie clutched Shauna’s wrist and gave her best sympathetic pout, because she was starting to feel bone tired. The adrenaline was wearing off and she was quickly approaching the type of tiredness that you can’t bounce back from. She was fucking cold and miserable and Nat and Misty were right.

“Shauna,” Jackie’s voice was weak, cracking with each syllable, “I think they’re right.”

“I’ll come get you,” Lottie added. “If anything is wrong, I’ll come get you. I swear.”

Something passed between Lottie and Shauna—some solemn understanding that looked like a familiar exchange. Shauna nodded and rose to her feet.

“Can you wash my hair?” Jackie asked weakly.

She had a feeling it would be a while before she gained the energy to force herself back out of bed once she was in it. She was fading fast—her headache vying for her attention again, her ears throbbing, her throat and chest burning with every single cough.

They sat on the floor of the tub, Jackie cross-legged and Shauna on her knees behind her. The showerhead poured hot water over them, Shauna closest to it. She drew Jackie back into her arms when she wanted to be under the stream and helped her sit forward when she didn’t. It was heaven, leaning against Shauna’s chest and feeling the warmth wash over them, but she wanted the salt and sand out of her hair so that she could rest without worrying about it.

Shauna had her arms around Jackie’s waist, her nose against her cheek. She nodded slowly, pressing a few kisses to the side of Jackie’s neck before guiding her out from under the water and reaching for the shampoo.

Shauna worked the suds through every inch of Jackie’s hair, massaging her scalp and dragging it down from the roots to the ends. She’d barely spoken since they got in, running soap over Jackie’s body with a cloth in near silence, pausing to support her when coughs shook her particularly hard.

“Shauna?” Jackie mumbled hesitantly.

Shauna guided Jackie’s head back, lifting her hair and draping it over her own shoulder, encouraging Jackie to relax against her while the shampoo rinsed away.

“Hmm?” Shauna hummed.

“Are you mad at me?”

Shauna froze for a moment, her fingers stilling against Jackie’s scalp. She cleared her throat and moved again, working the last of the suds out. Jackie squeezed her eyes shut.

“Are you ready to get out?” she said quietly.

“You’re just gonna ignore me then?” Jackie sniffed, fighting tears.

She was too tired already. Everything hurt enough already. Crying would be a goddamn nightmare, so she willed herself not to.

Shauna pressed her lips against Jackie’s cheek. Her temple. Her forehead.

“No, baby,” she finally answered. “No to both, just… can we get out? Is that okay?”

“Yeah,” Jackie rubbed her eyes with closed fists.

“Wait right here while I dry off,” Shauna instructed. “Two seconds. Can you sit up on your own?”

“I’m fine,” Jackie crossed her arms over her stomach and leaned forward, letting the water hit her back.

Just as she had for Shauna at the hotel, Shauna dressed quickly before helping Jackie out of the tub and into a towel. Shauna dried her meticulously, as if a single drop of water left on Jackie’s skin might do irrevocable harm. Once Shauna had her dressed in the warm pajamas she’d sprinted down to the basement for—Jackie leaning against the doorframe to watch her—she sat her on the floor and started brushing through the knots in her hair gently.

“I’m not mad,” Shauna whispered, voice thick. “You did the… right thing.”

“So… why does it feel like you are?” Jackie wiped her nose on her sleeve.

“Probably because I’m fucking heartbroken,” Shauna cried, stopping Jackie with a delicate hand on the side of her head when she tried to turn to face her. “I want to… protect you from everything. From the whole world. I want to—”

Shauna devolved into tears, continuing to stubbornly work the brush through Jackie’s hair.

“I should’ve protected you from so much. I could have, then. I was… good at shit out there,” Shauna set the brush aside, Jackie’s hair perfectly detangled. “And you would’ve let me, I think. Back then you would’ve let me, if I fucking bothered to try.”

Jackie turned to face her, sitting up on her knees to pull her into a hug.

“We were kids,” Jackie murmured in her ear, rubbing her back slowly. “Just fucking… kids. And it wasn’t your—your job to protect me.”

“It was,” Shauna squeezed Jackie tighter. “You spent every fucking moment looking out for me. I realized that just… way too fucking late.”

There were so many things Jackie wanted to say to Shauna. So many directions they needed to take this conversation in eventually. But Jackie was crashing. Her whole body ached and she couldn’t do much but cough into Shauna’s shoulder and hope she knew how she felt about her.

Jackie didn't remember Shauna getting her to the bed. She had no idea how much time had passed when she woke, groggy and confused, to the sound of Van and Nat helping Taissa through the room. Shauna was wrapped around her, one arm acting as a pillow—Jackie had to think way too hard to come to the conclusion that it was indeed Shauna's uninjured side cushioning the weight of her head—and the other around her waist, her chest pressed to Jackie's back. Her voice was a low rumble of hushes and names breaking through Jackie's exhaustion.

"…is she…"

"…vomited… Misty said her lungs sound…"

"Van's going to…"

"…no—"

"Shh, baby…"

Jackie opened her eyes to Van lifting Taissa fully into her arms and carrying her into the bathroom.

"She okay?" Jackie asked, her throat stinging.

"She's okay, Jax," Shauna murmured into her shoulder. "Van's just getting her cleaned up now. Everyone's okay."

Jackie nodded slowly, pain shooting through her temples with the motion.

"Babe?" she croaked.

"Yeah?" Shauna brushed her hair back off her face. Her hand felt unusually cold against Jackie's forehead.

"I really don't feel good."

23. the what if game

December 21st, 2021

12:17 pm

"Misty, I said let me wake her up first!"

"—might sleep through—"

"—already said no!"

Something cold touched Jackie's bare skin, just below her left shoulder blade. Before she could even force her heavy eyes open, it was gone, replaced with something beautifully warm.

"Mmm," Jackie groaned. Her throat ached so much she didn't dare open her mouth.

It was Shauna's hand, rubbing slow circles where the cold had stung her skin.

"Sorry, baby," Shauna said softly. "We need to listen to your lungs real quick and then you can go right back to sleep."

Jackie opened her eyes slowly. They were still in Lottie's massive bed, Shauna laying beside her. It wasn't bright—the heavy, velvet curtains were drawn against the sun and the only light on was coming from behind the bathroom door—but it hurt.

"Ow," Jackie choked out, shielding her eyes with a shaky hand.

"Oh," Shauna sighed sympathetically. "C'mere, Jax."

Shauna maneuvered Jackie like magic, somehow shifting her comfortably into her arms and guiding her head to her chest, all while they were still laying down.

"Better?" she asked.

She sounded fucking terrified— her putting on a brave face voice. She'd used it when Jackie's mom had been particularly unruly, when her own mom had stayed in bed for three days after a fight with her dad, when their plane had nosedived out of the fucking sky.

"Mmm," Jackie nodded, turning her cheek against the cushion of her breasts so that she could speak without the sound being muffled. "I'm always better if I can bury my face in your boobs, babe."

It worked. Shauna laughed and the mood lightened. Jackie felt the tiniest bit of tension ease out of her.

"Oh, for the love of God," Van's voice came from behind Shauna.

Jackie sat up just enough to peer over Shauna's shoulder. Van was sitting up against the headboard on the far side of the bed, her glasses actually on for once. Between her and Shauna was Taissa—half-awake, yawning and blinking slowly—propped up on two pillows.

Van's arm rested behind her, bent at the elbow to create a barrier around her head. Glasses on, limbs at the ready—Van playing goalie as always.

"Hi," Jackie croaked. She tried to flash Van a smile, but the second she turned the corner of her lip up a sharp pain shot through her temple and she grimaced instead.

Shauna turned onto her back. Jackie stayed on her side, partially on top of Shauna, propped up on an elbow to see Taissa and Van better.

"How you doing, Jack?" Van's sympathetic look was familiar and warm—her lips twisted into the ghost of a smile, a reminder that things could be better. That eventually, no matter what, they would be happy again.

"Been better," Jackie grumbled, reaching across Shauna for Van's hand where it lay next to Tai's shoulder.

Having eyes on all three of them was so fucking nice. She imagined the conversation Shauna and Van must've had, deciding to tuck both her and Taissa into Lottie's California king bed. She could hear Lottie teasing Van— how silly is it to need special order bedding now, huh?

"Well," Van sighed, running her thumb across Jackie's knuckles, "you sure look like shit."

"Hey!" Jackie pinched the skin between Van's finger and her thumb lightly, pulling a sour face. "You don't look too hot yourself and you didn't even do that much, asshole."

Shauna laughed gently. Jackie moved her hand to her ribs to feel the rise and fall of it.

"Didn't even do that much, she says," Van scoffed. "Shauna, have I made myself useful at any point in the last twelve hours?"

"Mmm," Shauna hummed, "yeah, actually. I cannot handle cleaning up puke, so putting yourself on vomit duty earned you some points in my book."

"Out of all the disgusting things you've done," Tai mumbled, her voice weak and raw, "puke turning your stomach is fucking ridiculous."

Van and Jackie chuckled, Shauna and Tai exchanged sleepy smiles, and Misty cleared her throat.

"That assessment, Jackie," she said curtly. "I just need a quick listen. You're next, Tai, so don't fall back asleep just yet."

"Great," Tai groaned, turning her face toward Van, "just what I need." Van rubbed her shoulder gently.

"Where do you want me to—" Jackie fell into a fit of hacking coughs.

She caught a glimpse of Van's wide eyes, some fear shining through, before the room moved suddenly. Misty and Shauna had each taken one of her arms, lifting her until she was upright. Shauna supported her back and Misty hooked her arms under her legs, swinging her around so that she was sitting at the edge of the bed.

"Fuck—" Jackie sputtered, wheezing in another deep breath. Her chest stung sharply. "Hurts."

“Oh, Jax,” Shauna fussed. “I’m so sorry, baby. What can I do?”

Jackie couldn’t force anymore words out. Misty crouched in front of her, holding her shoulders so that she wouldn’t fall forward. Jackie shut her eyes against her stupid fucking faux concern face and her stupid fucking stethoscope hung around her neck and her stupid fucking curly hair. She reached back blindly, wiggling her fingers at Shauna desperately.

Shauna shifted to sit directly behind her, her legs out to the side, and pulled Jackie’s back against her chest. Her hands came to rest on Jackie’s hips, holding gently like she was something fragile. Jackie nodded enthusiastically, because that’s exactly what she hadn’t known she needed, and covered Shauna’s hands with her own.

The coughing fit passed and she quieted. All of her ached, from the crown of her head to the arch of her feet. Her muscles sent waves of pain through her, ebbing and flowing but never fully letting up.

“Okay, Jackie,” Misty popped her stethoscope in her ears and held the bell between two fingers. “I’m just going to slip this down the front of your shirt to listen, then we’ll do the back.”

Jackie nodded and Misty pressed the same cold she’d felt on her back earlier to her chest. Misty moved it six times, pausing to listen for a few seconds at each stop. She pulled it back out silently, motioning forward, and Jackie leaned toward her. Shauna held her waist, secure enough that Jackie didn’t have to worry about tumbling straight out of the bed. Misty slid her arm between them and the cold metal hit her skin again, Misty lingering longer in one area than the rest.

“Well?” Shauna demanded. Misty laid her stethoscope over her shoulder and stood up straight. Jackie flopped herself backwards, Shauna grunting a little in surprise as she caught her weight. “What’s wrong? Why’d you pause like that?”

“Crackles throughout the left lung,” Misty reported. “Diminished at the base.”

“And?” Van snapped anxiously. “That means what?”

Shauna smoothed Jackie’s hair back and she hummed her appreciation.

“Aspiration pneumonia,” Misty sighed. “Same as Tai.”

“So—” Shauna started.

“Basically, they inhaled water,” Misty explained, “and whatever else was in it, and now their lungs are irritated. They need antibiotics, so we’re going to have to figure out what we want to do about that. They don’t need hospital care, it’s just a matter of—”

Jackie’s eyes were heavy. She whimpered, tuning Misty’s rambling out. She should probably stay awake for this conversation. She should probably care what was going on with her medically, but she was so fucking tired. And Shauna and Van were there. They wouldn’t let anything bad happen to her.

7:36 pm

It was dark out again, a few lamps casting a yellow glow against the dusty mauve walls. Jackie had bleary memories that meant she must've woken a few times. Van helping her to the bathroom to pee, snapping at Misty to get the fuck out, because Jackie had found the wherewithal even in her haze to absolutely refuse Shauna's help with that one. Lottie and Nat sitting at the foot of the bed, smoothing blankets and laying gentle hands on Jackie and Taissa's shins. Misty forcing her to choke down pills. Shauna rubbing her back while she vomited from the force of her coughs. Shauna feeling her forehead for fever. Shauna pulling her hair into twin dutch braids to keep it from tangling.

Shauna, Shauna, Shauna.

The love of her fucking life—who had been caring for her like no one else could've, making her feel so loved and safe—was very much pissing her off in the present moment.

"You've gotta walk around a little bit," Shauna was crouched in front of her, knees bent an awkward amount so that she could meet the hug Jackie had pitched forward for. Jackie's legs dangled off the side of the high bed, her feet not even reaching the plush rug beneath it. She buried her face in the crook of Shauna's neck and draped her arms over her shoulders. "I know you don't want to but if you don't you'll get sicker."

"How do you know?" Jackie grumbled, biting back tears, because it was endlessly stupid and weak of her to babble and beg and bargain into Shauna's skin, instead of just getting her ass up. But she couldn't make herself do it. Her body was screaming at her to lay the fuck down. "It really fucking feels like it'd make it worse."

Shauna kissed her temple. Took a breath. Kissed her cheek near her hairline. Gathered both of her braids into one hand and placed them behind her back.

Shauna had always used silence to say so much.

Jackie sat back, clinging to Shauna's shoulders for balance, but supporting her own weight. Shauna sank down lower to a more comfortable position, perched on her heels. She took Jackie's waist in her hands and smiled gently.

"When Callie was in middle school, she got really, really sick," Shauna said quietly.

Jackie brought one hand up to Shauna's neck, drawing her thumb in little circles behind her ear. Shauna hadn't brought Callie up before. Not really. Not without prompting.

"And I was… out of town," Shauna's lip twitched. She was definitely leaving something out when she said out of town. "Mono. Remember when we got that?"

"God, yeah," Jackie groaned. "Fucking awful."

Junior year—they'd stayed at Shauna's house for two weeks, Deb calling Jackie's parents to gently insist that they let her care for both girls. Lottie had joked when they got back to school— of course they both got the kissing disease at the same time, joined at the hip more than boyfriend and girlfriend. (Shauna had gone red and silent. Jackie had turned the conversation around and tried not to overthink Shauna's embarrassment.)

"It really fucking was."

"But…" Jackie grinned, despite the soreness it sparked behind her eyes. "You wanna know what's so gross?"

Shauna raised her brow to prompt Jackie to go on, her eyes lit up a bit.

“I kinda loved it,” Jackie admitted sheepishly. “Like… all we did for weeks was cuddle. I was a little sad when we got better.”

“Me too,” Shauna giggled quietly, her cheeks scrunched up sweetly. “I cried when you finally went home. But… we also had to get up and do laps because my mom insisted.”

“I blocked that part out,” Jackie murmured.

“I don’t blame you,” Shauna stood up, her knees cracking audibly, and stretched her lower back a bit. “It sucked. But it does help.”

“Two more minutes?” Jackie gave her best pout. Shauna relented, guiding Jackie forward to rest her cheek against her stomach. Jackie wrapped her arms around Shauna’s waist. “You didn’t finish your story, baby.”

“Hmm?”

“About Callie,” Jackie answered. “When she had mono.”

“Right, well,” Shauna swallowed and busied her hands, drawing lightly between Jackie’s shoulder blades. “Jeff didn’t realize that she needed to move some. She got pneumonia. Really bad. High fever. She had to… spend a night in the hospital. And the thing that helped after that was making her walk a little bit every few hours.”

Jackie squeezed Shauna tighter.

“So, my point is,” Shauna cleared her throat, “that I know you need to get out of bed for a little bit.”

“Okay,” Jackie whined, releasing her and shimmying forward until her toes hit the ground. “You’re right.”

“Mhmm,” Shauna took Jackie’s hands and pulled her to her feet. “You should really listen to me more.”

“Don’t get too excited,” Jackie smirked.

Jackie looped her arm through Shauna’s elbow and clung to her as they paced back and forth. Her ribs stung like hell. She coughed intermittently, Shauna pausing each time and petting her hair or her back until it passed.

Jackie mostly focused on Van and Taissa. Van was wide awake. She and Shauna probably hadn’t slept much, if any.

Van was taking Taissa’s temperature with the thermometer they’d used when Sadie was little—Lottie must’ve dug it out. The kind that goes in your ear, not under your tongue, because Sadie would never sit still long enough for that one to read and none of them could bring themselves to force her. Van read the number and glanced at Shauna, but they didn’t say a word. Jackie would’ve fussed to be let in on the secret, to hear the bad news, but she was too busy trying to keep her heavy eyes open and her wobbly legs straight.

Van pulled the covers off of Taissa, leaving her under just the white, satin sheet. Tai whimpered in her sleep and Van held her the best she could without pressing her body against

her—arm across her belly and hand brushing her cheek. Her fever must be high, for Van to be holding back like that.

Tai looked pretty, even still. Even with a distressed frown on her face and chapped lips and a sheen of sweat across her forehead.

When Shauna finally let Jackie get back into bed, she put her next Taissa. Jackie rolled toward her, resting a hand just a few inches from her shoulder, not wanting to add any heat. Shauna and Van were sitting up straight— uneasy. Even more fitfull than Jackie and Taissa, somehow.

“Lay down,” Jackie begged, her eyes fluttering shut. “Both of you. It’s gonna be okay.”

Shauna sighed. Van hummed noncommittally.

“Please.”

Shauna wrapped Jackie up, enveloping every inch of her all at once, and Jackie forced her eyes open just long enough to make sure the shuffle she heard beside them was Van sinking down in the bed.

December 22nd, 2021

1:01 am

“Because it’s a bad fucking plan!” Van’s voice, slightly muffled, an angry whisper.

Jackie opened her eyes slowly. Taissa was already awake, staring over Jackie’s shoulder. She looked a little… hazy. Probably the sickness—pneumonia, Misty had said? But Jackie couldn’t be sure she was one hundred percent there. Shauna’s absence was so easily clockable, her pretty features devoid of their light. No little frowns pinching the skin between her brows or amused twitches of her nose. Taissa could still speak and cry when she was gone. Her forehead could crease and her lips could pull up or down in a way that almost made sense.

“—not many options!”

“—we’ve already done—”

Natalie and Misty. Scheming something. Tai hadn’t noticed that Jackie was awake.

“Taissa?” she said softly. “You… okay?”

Okay wasn’t the right word, but Jackie didn’t have a better one. She covered Tai’s hand with her own and Tai tangled their fingers together on top of Lottie’s ridiculously silky bamboo sheets.

“I’m okay,” Tai offered simply. “Are you okay?”

She was awake—no terror in her voice or far-away glimmer in her eyes.

“Yeah. I think so, at least,” Jackie turned her head— ouch, everything still fucking hurt— to the source of the chatter. The door was nearly shut, a crack of light from the hallway

streaming in. “What are they—”

“Shauna, back me up!” Van whisper-yelled.

“Shhh,” Shauna was quieter than Van, but Jackie could still hear her. “You’ll wake them.”

Jackie let her head fall back to the pillow, exhausted even just from that much movement. Tai smirked toward Van and Shauna’s disembodied voices, a look that was half affection and half annoyance.

“Too late for that,” she muttered.

Jackie let out a breath that was almost a laugh.

“I don’t think it’s… the worst idea ever,” Shauna sounded apologetic. “I don’t see what else we can really do.”

“Oh, we are so not on the same team anymore,” Van huffed. “You’ve officially lost your shit again.”

“Here, just come—” Shauna’s voice faded and footsteps drew away from them.

“Do you know what bad ideas Shauna is supporting right now?” Jackie asked.

“No,” Tai sighed, somehow a sound too weak and too loud. “Only our idiots were loud enough to actually wake us. I was only up a few seconds before you.”

“Figures,” Jackie chuckled, regretting it immediately when she felt it in her head and her throat and her chest. “Should we go stop them?”

“Probably,” Tai let her eyes flutter shut.

“Mmm,” Jackie hummed her agreement.

Neither of them moved. A few seconds passed. Maybe minutes. Probably not any longer than that, but Jackie couldn’t really be sure because everything was sleepy and hazy.

“How bad was it?” Tai’s voice came out fragile. Their hands had drifted apart. Jackie reconnected them. She opened her eyes, but Taissa’s were still shut. It was dark anyway, someone had flicked the hall light off when they’d moved their conversation. They were still there, though—a dull hum with all the right pitches that told Jackie none of the women had strayed too far. “Out there, I mean.”

“I’m not sure how to answer that,” Jackie was honest. Taissa deserved that. “I don’t have anything to reference, really. I wasn’t there when it got… noticeable. Do you want me to explain it to you? I can just sort of… tell you the story, if that’s really what you want.”

“I don’t want you to—” Tai coughed and Jackie scrunched her nose in sympathy. “But I need to know. Only you and Shauna saw the whole thing and she’s always… well…”

“Hidden it?” Jackie guessed.

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure?” Jackie sniffed and swallowed what felt like mucus coating the back of her throat. It made her choke a little, but that gave Tai time to think.

“I’m sure.”

4:26 am

“It’ll just be a little pinch, Jackie,” Misty smiled as she said it.

The overhead light was on and Jackie had been woken out of a deep, peaceful sleep to Misty holding the same type of IV start kit that Jackie used to find occasionally when she did laundry, forgotten in Rachel’s scrub pockets.

(“Shit, I’ve gotta get better about that,” Rachel would sigh every time. “Those are really fucking expensive.”

Jackie would brush it off: “If they want you to have time to remember things like that, they need to stop screwing you over so much.”)

What had happened just weeks ago felt like an entirely different life. Jackie was used to that feeling. She knew how to cut off the past. (To a fault, she thought, when she saw Shauna hovering over Misty’s shoulder, looking sick to her stomach. Because wasn’t that what Jackie had done to her, too?)

Jackie turned away and took a deep breath. She was fine with this kind of thing, as long as she didn’t look. Tai was still asleep, one of Lottie’s expensive silk scarves draped across her eyes against the light. Van perched next to her, holding a small vial in her hand and checking something on her phone, presumably making sure that Misty wasn’t planning on poisoning them.

The tight squeeze of a tourniquet around her upper arm. A cold scrub just below her elbow, the smell of rubbing alcohol burning her nostrils. The poke and slide she could just barely feel inside her vein, until her body adapted and it stopped feeling like anything. A sticky film pressed against her skin.

Other than the addition of far too much tape to hold it in place, Jackie had to admit that Misty had done a decent job. She looked pleased with herself. Shauna was holding an IV bag up to the light, like she was checking for tampering.

“We didn’t let anything out of our sight,” Nat walked in, Lottie trailing behind her. They were both dressed in suspiciously plain, dark clothing. “Don’t worry.”

Shauna nodded curtly and passed the bag to Misty.

“What do you mean, out of your sight?” Jackie frowned. “Where did this stuff come from?”

Nat and Lottie did a cartoonish job of avoiding Jackie’s question—hands clasped behind backs, eyes drifting up and to the corner, all but whistling a tune. Shauna propped Jackie’s arm up on a stack of pillows and fussed with her covers, straightening them across her lap. Misty squeezed the bag, letting the liquid run into the tubing attached to it. Tai started to stir and Van spoke to her in hushed tones.

“Did… Misty I assumed you just had it,” Jackie felt a rush of cold in her arm as the tubing twisted into place. Misty hung the bag up on the headboard. “Where did you guys get this shit?”

“They robbed a pharmacy,” Van handed Misty the vial she’d been studying. “That little mom and pop one down on 14th.”

“Shit security,” Lottie shrugged. “It was easy.”

“Fucking hell,” Taissa mumbled. She made to stretch her arms over her head, but stopped halfway, wincing and bringing them back down to her sides. Van wrapped an arm around her, her hand gripping her shoulder, gentle but firm. Tai slumped against her, coughing into her neck. “God, sorry.”

Van shook her head and dropped a kiss to Taissa’s forehead.

Misty shoved a needle in the vial and flipped it upside down, drawing the plunger back until it was full of translucent yellow. Shauna sat down next to Jackie, hovering near her arm like she might smack Misty’s hands away if she came too close.

“Any allergies, Jackie?”

She put a plastic cap on the needle and twisted it off, then pushed the plunger up carefully until there was no air at the top. Misty handling medication was fucking terrifying and, judging by their pale faces, Van and Shauna felt the same. But Lottie and Nat seemed sure of it, so Jackie had to trust it because she needed to feel less fucking shitty.

“No allergies.”

To Jackie’s surprise, Misty handed Shauna the syringe, adjusting her glasses carefully. Shauna took it uncertainly and waited for instruction.

“The fluids running right now are just normal saline. You’re dehydrated. This,” Misty tapped the syringe in Shauna’s hand, ‘is Ceftriaxone. It’s an antibiotic. Normally, I would just let it run through your IV with the fluids, but we have a less than ideal set up,’ Misty waved her hand at the precariously perched bag, “so Shauna is going to push it in slowly.”

“Is that—” Shauna interrupted.

“It’s absolutely safe, it’s just more time consuming. So you’re going to do it while I start Tai’s IV.”

“Oh, joy,” Tai grumbled.

“Attach this right here and twist,” Misty helped Shauna figure it out, Shauna batting her hand away when she got the hang of it. “Good. You push it over five minutes, but it doesn’t need to be exact. So just put a little in—see these longer lines, one of these—” Shauna nodded, “and then count to fifteen and do it again until it’s all gone. Okay?”

Shauna took the task seriously. She wouldn’t let Jackie talk to her, because then she lost count. She wouldn’t look away from the little syringe, worried something might go wrong if she let it out of her sight. Jackie just watched Shauna concentrate—her bottom lip drawn between her teeth and her brow furrowed sweetly—and rubbed her free hand over her lower back in a way that she hoped was soothing.

2:37 pm

"You would've stayed," Lottie choked on tears. "That's what I'm saying, Shauna."

Jackie froze at the end of the hall, peering into the kitchen. She was starving. The medication seemed to be doing its fucking job, because up until that point she'd only been able to choke down small snacks that Shauna begged her to eat. Lottie and Shauna were the only ones in the room, a few feet apart, standing next to the marble island. Shauna was facing away from Jackie. She was wrapped in a flannel and her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail and fuck, that made Jackie want to snuggle into her even more than she usually did.

"I don't—" Shauna shook her head.

"No," Lottie sniffed, "don't try and pretend. If it'd been Jackie you would've fucking stayed. No matter how insane it was. You only pulled me out because Jackie wouldn't leave me."

"I didn't wanna leave you there either, Lot," Shauna took Lottie's cheek in her hand. "We might not… we might have our issues, but I—"

"You're a fucking hypocrite!" Lottie sobbed. She buried her face in her hands, knocking Shauna's fingers away. "You're selfish. You wouldn't have cared. You would've stayed. You would've. I'm not crazy for that, I'm—"

Shauna pulled Lottie into a hug. She cried harder, but she wound her arms around Shauna's neck and perched her chin on her shoulder.

"You're right," Shauna admitted quietly. "You're right. I'm sorry."

5:48 pm

"Are those child locks?" Taissa narrowed her eyes at Natalie.

"Screw, Lot," Natalie put the screwdriver between her teeth and held her hand out.

"I'd love to," Lottie winked, handing it over.

Nat snorted and started fixing the sliding lock into the top of the door frame. They were all in the living room, Taissa insisting that she would absolutely lose her fucking mind if she didn't get out of the bedroom for a few hours. She was on the same velvet couch she'd fallen asleep on the night they'd had to wake her for dinner, her back to Van's chest and her legs kicked out in front of them. She held a mug in two hands—caffeine withdrawal, she'd sighed, begging for a cup of coffee. Her IV was in the back of her hand, the tubing taped to her skin so that it wouldn't get caught and pull out.

"Hello?" Taissa asked. "Did you hear me?"

"Sure did," Natalie jumped down off of the step stool. "And they sure as fuck are. Mind your business. Pick a movie, already."

“I don’t want to pick,” Tai set her drink down on the coffee table and tipped her head back to rest against Van’s shoulder. Van stopped clicking through the options for her, setting the remote on her own thigh. “I’m too tired.”

“Mmm,” Van nodded sympathetically. “Do you think maybe you should go back to—”

“Do not finish that fucking sentence,” Taissa’s tone was firm, but her hands were soft, gripping Van’s forearms. “I’m not going back in there right now.”

“You pick, Jack,” Van tossed the remote and Shauna snatched it out of the air before Jackie could even reach for it.

They sat curled up in an oversized armchair, Jackie half in her lap and fully tucked into her side. She’d been up since she wandered into the kitchen earlier. Shauna had fixed her not one meal, but two —Jackie had wanted a little pasta and a half a grilled cheese to go with the giant fruit smoothie Van had demanded she drink and Shauna’d obliged happily—and then relented when Jackie had insisted that she couldn’t go back to bed.

It’d been just them in the living room for the most part, the others flitting in and out in different combinations. Jackie wore the flannel Shauna’d had on, pulled tight around her middle. It smelled like Shauna and it was comforting and warm, but Jackie had the real deal right next to her. Shauna had let her lounge in her lap and lay her head against her chest and kiss her—in short bursts, because she was scared Jackie would suffocate somehow—but it was an extra little something to drape the checkered fabric around herself. The stupid little thrill she’d gotten from wearing Shauna’s clothes as a teen was just as strong now.

“I don’t wanna pick,” Jackie whined. “Shauna, you pick.”

“No way,” Shauna squeezed her closer. “Not with you and Van here, I’d never find something you’d approve of.”

“I think Cats is on HBO Max!” Misty chimed in from her spot on the opposite sofa. “I saw it in theaters. I loved—”

“Actually, But I’m a Cheerleader sounds good!”

“Let’s do But I’m a Cheerleader.”

Jackie and Van suggested their comfort movie—well, one of them, but they couldn’t exactly pop Practical Magic on right now—in tandem. Shauna pulled up the search bar and typed it in quickly, before Misty could make any arguments in favor of her pick.

December 23rd, 2021

2:29 am

The four of them hadn’t stopped sleeping together, even though they really could’ve. It was nice, having all of them in the same room. They mostly stayed in the same spots: Jackie on the far left, then Shauna, then Taissa, then Van. There’d been a few times where they’d swapped, Jackie and Van in the center, when Van had gotten too worried about the pitch of Jackie’s coughing fits.

(They were the Willy Wonka grandparents, except their bed was more expensive than Charlie Bucket's entire home.)

Jackie stirred awake, desperately thirsty and hungry and needing to pee. Her arm was around Shauna's waist and Shauna's was draped across Taissa's. Tai had her face buried in Van's chest and her fingers tangled in Van's tee-shirt. Jackie tried to extricate herself without waking anyone, but Shauna jumped the second she moved. She twisted her head around, fear in her eyes, until she realized with a flash of relief that Jackie was okay.

"Oh," she whispered, noticing her arm around Taissa, "here, baby." Shauna started to roll toward Jackie, but Jackie put a hand on her lower back to stop her.

"No," Jackie dropped a kiss to her forehead. "It's okay. You can stay like that."

Shauna frowned, but resecured her arm around Taissa's waist.

"I've gotta pee anyway," Jackie kissed her again before swinging her legs out of bed. "And I need to go get water. I'll be right back. Stay here."

Shauna nodded reluctantly. Jackie tiptoed through the room, careful to steer clear of the area to the left of the door that creaked loudly. She pushed the door open slowly, avoiding the squeak, and—

"Ouch!"

Jackie lept back, startled. Shauna bolted up. Tai lifted herself to a half-seated position. Van switched the lamp on.

So much for not waking them.

"Natalie?" Jackie asked quietly.

There was a rustle of blankets and a grunt. Nat pulled the door back slowly, rubbing the back of her head. She looked exhausted, purple splotches beneath her eyes and a gauntness to her that felt amplified.

"Have you been sleeping outside the door?" Jackie whispered.

Nat shrugged and crossed her arms. Shauna reached Jackie's side, pulling a sweatshirt over her head. Tai hacked behind them and Van started murmuring to her.

"Oh," Jackie sighed, wrapping her arms around Nat's skinny waist and forcing her into a hug. "Are you hungry? I need a snack."

"A little," Nat admitted, patting Jackie between the shoulder blades in a way that told her that she was done with the forced affection.

"C'mon," Jackie released her. "Shauna?"

Shauna ushered them through the door with a hand on each of their backs. "I'll make us something."

3:31 pm

“What was your first girlfriend like?” Shauna scanned Jackie’s face, her own features curious and open.

She was on her stomach, propped up on her elbows to look at Jackie, who lay flat on her back. Jackie played with the opal ring on Shauna’s finger absently. They’d been playing their version of twenty questions— try to learn twenty-five years of information really fucking quick, so that you feel less like you’re uhauling —while Van helped Tai take a shower.

“Hmmm,” Jackie closed her eyes and smiled. “She was really pretty. Smart, too. Like, annoyingly so.”

She paused to take a raspy breath—she was still having some trouble, even though the antibiotics had helped a ton— and Shauna didn’t say a word in response. Jackie opened her eyes to find her looking mildly disapproving. Because of course she was.

“Dark brown hair,” Jackie pushed a lock of Shauna’s behind her ear. “Super thick. Beautiful. I’d braid it for hours.”

Shauna’s nose twitched, but she managed to keep a straight face otherwise.

“Stunning skin. So soft all the time,” Jackie trailed her fingers down Shauna’s arm. “Oh—don’t get me started on her eyes. Or her boobs, holy shit.”

Confusion and hurt flashed in Shauna’s eyes. Jackie palmed her cheek.

“This amazing sense of humor. Very dry sometimes, totally sarcastic. And always in her head about things. Just beautifully artistic and brilliant and—”

“You wanna call her?” Shauna deadpanned, clearly trying to stifle her jealousy. “It sounds pretty serious.”

“Oh, very serious,” Jackie giggled and Shauna stopped hiding her frown. Her lips pulled down and her eyes did that thing where they somehow widened and narrowed at the same time—growing taller on her sweet, round face. “Like stupidly so. And she looks so sexy when she’s being a jealous brat for no reason because I’m talking about her.”

Shauna’s jaw dropped for a second, before her face twisted into a laugh. Jackie slipped her arms around her and drew her close, leading her face to the side of her neck. Shauna let herself lay down all the way, cuddled into Jackie’s side.

“Okay, maybe you’re right,” she mumbled, resting a hand against Jackie’s hipbone. She’d been strategically avoiding putting weight anywhere soft, like she might injure Jackie somehow, and Jackie had given up on coaxing her out of that little dance. “Maybe I can’t handle actually knowing.”

“I don’t think you wanna know about my exes,” Jackie agreed with a chuckle, “but that’s not why I said that. I was answering your question.”

Shauna’s thumb paused where it’d been sweeping across the skin just beneath the waistband of her pajamas.

“You think that counts? That we were…” she trailed off, swallowing something down. Her voice was heavy.

“Why not?” Jackie asked gently. “We did everything but call it that.”

Shauna was silent for just long enough to send a flutter of nerves through Jackie’s stomach. She opened her mouth to try and smooth things over, but Shauna’s lips found her skin. She planted slow kisses on the side of Jackie’s neck.

“You’ve… been with women, haven’t you?” Jackie blurted out.

Shauna froze. Maybe Jackie had taken the game too far. Maybe there were things that Shauna didn’t want to discuss and Shauna had never reacted well to being pushed for information that she didn’t want to—

“Why do you think that?” Shauna wasn’t mad. She was curious. Her thumb started moving in slow circles again.

“Well…” Jackie ran her fingers through Shauna’s hair. “I know you like women and I know you… weren’t super, um, restrictive with seeing other people.”

Shauna let out a breathy laugh. Jackie’s skin tingled.

“And… you… well, Shauna, you fuck like you’ve been with women.”

Shauna’s laugh grew louder. Jackie grinned with her.

“Yes,” she kissed Jackie again, just beneath her ear, “I’ve been with women. By your logic, though—” Shauna paused to suck on Jackie’s skin and Jackie gasped, “—you were the… first for that, too.”

“Yeah,” Jackie nodded and wrapped her fingers around Shauna’s wrist, trapping her hand against her hip. “I think that’s right.”

Jackie slid Shauna’s hand lower, trying to force her to the heat she’d brought on.

“Jax…” Shauna groaned, unsure, “I don’t know if that’s a good idea. You’re still not feeling well.”

Jackie opened her hips wider and tugged again. Shauna kissed her jaw, sweet and chaste, her fingers stubbornly still.

“So make me feel better, baby,” Jackie rocked her hips up so that Shauna’s hand brushed against the front of her underwear. They both moaned. “Please? I’ll be so good. I won’t exert myself, like at all, just… I want you really bad right now.”

“Okay, okay, shhh. Someone’s gonna hear you,” Shauna relented, sliding her fingers against Jackie gently. Jackie whimpered in relief. “But if you get too out of breath, I’m stopping.”

Jackie evened out her breath like her life depended on it.

December 24th, 2021

11:56 am

“You told me the hallucinations stopped when we got back.”

Jackie and Van froze outside the door. Taissa's voice was muffled, but her words were clear enough to make out. They'd just FaceTimed Sadie with Lot, sitting out on the back porch, because Jackie had all but demanded fresh air.

("They used to take sick people out to sea to get better all the time!" she'd argued.

"Yeah," Shauna'd snapped, "but I'm not sure it makes as much since when the sea is the thing that almost killed them."

"I thought sick people went to the mountains," Van had mused, "and crazy people went to the sea. Or was it the opposite? Someone definitely went to the mountains."

"Well perfect, I'm crazy, too. Works either way. Let's go, Palmer.")

Van raised a brow at Jackie. Jackie brought a finger to her lips to hush her.

"Yeah, I lied," Shauna answered casually. "You told me you stopped sleepwalking when we got back."

"Fair enough," Tai conceded.

They waited a few seconds, Jackie's fingers digging into Van's forearm, to see if Tai or Shauna would say more.

They didn't.

6:10 pm

"I should've done something," Jackie chewed her lip and watched Tai's eyes flash with confusion. "When I realized you were sleepwalking, I mean."

Tai sighed and sat up straighter in the green paisley armchair that sat in the corner of Lottie's bedroom. She looked better than she had. She wasn't pale or queasy. She could eat actual meals. She was still sicker than Jackie though, unable to walk very far without coughing or wheezing. Jackie was perched on the ottoman a few feet away, her legs crossed beneath her. Van and Shauna had given them a bit of space, wandering off with Nat to talk what Jackie and Taissa assumed was strategy for something. They'd been babying them, acting as if they couldn't handle big conversations and trying to hide their mounting stress. (What Van and Shauna didn't realize—sweet, stupid, lovely things that they were—was that Jackie and Tai's allowance of this bullshit secrecy attempt was their own version of babying them back.)

"You couldn't have known," Tai shook her head. "If anyone should've done something, it was me. But I ignored it. I couldn't—I just couldn't. I don't know."

"I get that," Jackie stirred the honey into her tea, her silver spoon clanking against the side of the intricate mug, swirls of deep violet and emerald green painting everything but the handle, coated in a beautiful imitation of gold leafing. (At least Jackie hoped it was imitation.) "But you were just… doing your best. I should've said something—"

"Don't tell them, Jackie," Taissa leaned forward to rest an insistent hand against her calf. "It won't do any good. It'll only add stress. There's no need for… what ifs, you know?"

Jackie felt that deep in her chest.

Every time she tried to do the what if math, she came out the other side more wounded than when she began. What if she'd run to Shauna immediately? Maybe Shauna would've hated her more. Maybe Jackie would've been killed by the other girls. What if she'd come back to her shortly after their rescue? That one seemed better most of the time. Jackie felt sure they'd have slotted together, desperate and clingy, much like they had now.

Except there were problems there, too. Jackie wouldn't have been there to wake Van from her night terrors or insist that she eat. They'd never have been together the way that they were and Jackie didn't miss being Van's girlfriend, they were miles beyond that, but it was important that she had been at one point. Jackie was the only one who could've pulled Van out of Siobhan's clutches, she was sure of it. Sadie was her fucking kid, in every way that mattered.

And Callie. Callie wouldn't even exist.

The what if game was pointless. Shauna and Van had enough versions of it to play, they didn't need a new one.

"You're right," Jackie covered Tai's hand with her own for a moment. Tai exhaled slowly, nodding, and sank back into her chair. "It can be our secret."

Tai smiled like they were seventeen and gossiping about girls, their feet kicked up in the air, the newest issue of Sassy Magazine laying open on the floor. They'd never done that, of course, but in another life they might've.

"It's a pact," Tai laughed.

Jackie held her pinky out, grinning. Tai rolled her eyes, but met the promise with her own.

"You and Shauna have a lot of secrets, don't you?" Jackie swallowed. The question was risky, but if there was ever a time to try it, it was now.

Tai raised an inquisitive eyebrow— where are you going with this, Taylor?

"I wouldn't say a lot," Tai parsed. "It's a… quality not quantity situation."

"Yeah. That sounds right," Jackie smiled, trying to keep it light. "Did she… ever talk about me? Out there? Before I… well, before I was gone?"

"Constantly," Tai crossed one leg over the other, her navy blue pajamas riding up at the ankle.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You already are," Tai looked warm and open. She wasn't shutting Jackie out, even if the words felt curt. She was straightforward, always. When it came to a question of betraying Shauna's trust, she wouldn't pretend to consider something that crossed a line. Jackie appreciated that. It calmed her nerves.

"Do you think she loved me before?" Jackie stared into her cup, embarrassment heating up her cheeks. "Like… do you think she was in love with me before she thought I was dead or…

do you think the guilt just made her… I don't know, confused about her feelings or something?"

"Oh, Jackie," Tai sighed sympathetically. "Shauna has always been in love with you. Everything was always about you, even before you were… gone."

Tears formed in the corners of Jackie's eyes. She wiped at them before they could fall, nodding to avoid letting Tai hear the shakiness that she knew would be in her voice.

"And," Tai shook her head, "you two are both the world's biggest idiots, the way you question what's right in front of your fucking faces."

8:19 pm

"You guys just got so close so fast," Van shrugged. "It was… we were sort of, y'know…"

"Leftover," Jackie filled in.

They were in bed with Shauna and Tai, the four of them forming a circle around the giant bowl of ice cream they were picking at. Marionberry—one that Van had stashed at the house months ago in case of Jackie going on hunger strike. Taissa had said that she was craving something sweet and Van had dumped practically the entire gallon in a popcorn bowl and grabbed them all spoons.

"I just never understood what happened," Jackie gathered a careful spoonful, rounding it off on the side of the bowl. "It was like… flipping a switch."

Shauna and Taissa made heavy eye contact, having a conversation that Jackie and Van couldn't hear. Jackie glanced at Van and she shrugged almost imperceptibly.

"You can tell them," Shauna slipped a bite into her mouth, spoon backwards, sliding it back out between pursed lips. The same way she'd eaten ice cream since they were little girls.

"Do you want me to?" Tai looked just shy of stunned.

Jackie studied Shauna's face, because as much as she wanted to shake her shoulders and beg for whatever answer they were dancing around cryptically, she wanted Shauna to be certain about sharing it even more.

"Yeah," Shauna nodded. "Actually, I've been… well, I want them to know. Just… I don't wanna be the one to have to tell it."

Tai thought for a moment. She dropped her spoon in the bowl and stared into the middle distance, like she was writing a script in her head. She probably was, lawyer and politician, suited to that kind of quick preparation.

"I realized that Shauna was pregnant before anyone else did. She faked her period. Dipped a cloth in deer blood and I saw her. Put two and two together," Taissa paused to sip from the water bottle that rested against her thigh. Shauna was expressionless. Van rubbed Tai's calf absentmindedly. "So I asked her about it and she let it slip that it was Jeff's. That she was terrified of losing you over it, Jackie. More terrified about that than the baby, really."

Jackie scooted closer to Shauna on the bed, suddenly unable to tolerate the six inches between them. Shauna flashed her a small, sad smile, but she slipped an arm around her waist. Jackie breathed her in. She smelled like home— clean laundry and warm spices and fresh flowers. Everything lovely all at once.

"She was scared, so she tried to—" Tai cleared her throat. Her nose twitched with suppressed tears. "Fuck. She took the underwire out of her bra and your stupid seabreeze and a lighter and she went into the middle of the woods and I caught her."

Jackie's heart stopped. Everything hurt. Worse than angry waves crashing into her or pneumonia wrecking her body. Worse than when she got the scar on her chest that refused to heal or when her mom's rings left indents across her cheek that she pretended she couldn't see.

"Fuck, Shauna," Van was saying a lot more than words ever could've, looking at Shauna with more sympathy than she ever had. I'm sorry and I understand and I forgive you and I love you and I'm bound to you like we're all bound to each other and I wish things had been different.

Jackie couldn't react. She was frozen. She watched Tai take a deep breath.

"She hadn't started yet, when I found her. But she was going to do it anyway," Tai and Shauna looked at each other like everything between them was laid out on the bed, next to the forgotten ice cream and the sticky spoons and the crumpled up blankets. "So I thought it was better if I… helped her. Obviously it didn't… take but… that's what made us… us, I think."

Jackie turned to meet Shauna's eyes. Glassy, but not the going away kind. Just the pain of an old wound, pure and simple. Jackie screwed her face up against tears—she didn't want to cry, not when she was this sick, not when Shauna was the one who had every right to break down—and pressed her hand to the center of Shauna's chest. Shauna squeezed her wrist lightly.

"It hurt too much. And I was scared that I'd get an infection and I just… I didn't wanna die," she shook her head. Tears shone in her eyes and she let out a short, incredulous laugh. "But I… well, it doesn't matter now. Just… it felt like me giving up on the abortion was the… beginning of the end for us. Always regretted it."

"No," Jackie insisted. "No. You were… you were right. You were right to stop. You—"

Shauna pulled Jackie into a hug, cutting her off.

"We can't have you crying, Jax. You'll feel even shittier."

Jackie nodded, her chin digging into Shauna's shoulder. Shauna wanted to move on and Jackie had to let her.

December 25th, 2021

10:02 am

“I miss my fucking kid,” Van poured herself a cup of coffee from the tray she’d brought in for them. “That’s all.”

She’d been down. A little snappy—not at Taissa or Jackie, of course, but with Shauna, who’d met her energy until she’d broken and demanded a reason for it.

“God, yeah,” Jackie groaned sympathetically. “I wonder if she’s up yet. Do you think she’ll call or do you think she’s gonna stay all broody?”

“Broody,” Van sighed, rubbing at eyes rimmed-red from unshed tears. “Hurt.”

“Yeah,” Jackie ran her fingers through Shauna’s hair. Her head was in Jackie’s lap, her arm slung across her thighs. “You’re probably right. We’ll explain it when it’s all over. She’ll understand.”

Jackie’s heart shattered with Van’s, a clear picture of Sadie’s worried, broken frown flashing in her mind’s eye.

“I know she will,” Van sat on the ottoman, lifting Tai’s feet onto her lap. “Just fucking sucks.”

“You two are really like…” Tai chewed on her words, “co-parents. It seems like you actually… raised her together.”

Van nodded, her lips drawn around her mug in a long sip.

“Well, she’s Van’s, really,” Jackie let her fingers drift lower to scratch Shauna’s back. “But I try to be as involved as I can.”

“Bullshit,” Van shook her head with a small smile. ‘Yeah, it comes down to me in the end, but Jackie’s a mom to her. All the way,’ Van rubbed Tai’s ankle and turned to roll her eyes at Jackie. “Sadie would kick your ass if she heard you talking like that.”

Jackie grinned, even as something tugged harder at her heart. “God, I just wanna squeeze her so bad.”

“She seems like a really special kid,” Shauna trailed her fingers up and down Jackie’s thigh gently.

“So does Callie.”

Shauna froze. Jackie held her breath.

“She’s too smart for her own good,” Shauna mumbled. “Sarcastic as fuck.”

“Wonder where she got that,” Tai sounded far away—in the conversation technically, but not really.

“She’s worse than me,” Shauna shook her head against Jackie’s leg. “And she’s… well, she’s gonna be pissed at me, too. For missing Christmas. I was never in the running for mom of the year but… I’ve never missed Christmas. And it’s not like Jeff knows what she wants.”

“She’ll forgive you,” Jackie promised. Shauna sighed and pulled the comforter tighter around her shoulders. “Tai?”

“Hmm?”

“Can I see a picture of Sammy?” Jackie asked. Van’s eyes lit up like sirens— what’re you doing? —and Shauna stopped stroking her thigh. Tai’s face didn’t change.

“You must… really miss him. When I had to be away from Sadie, I would just stare at pictures of her. Showed her to little old ladies at the supermarket too, just to hear them tell me how cute she was.”

“Babe?” Tai slipped her feet off of Van’s lap. “Will you get me my phone?”

Jackie smiled and Tai flashed her a small one in return.

“I will warn you,” Tai said, her voice a bit choked, “he’s the cutest kid on the planet, no contest.”

12:37 pm

“It’s pink,” Shauna stood up, her hands on her hips. The bag that held the reusable Christmas tree lay on the floor between her and Nat, partially unzipped.

“It’s cute,” Lottie corrected. “Sadie went through a pink phase. Everything had to be pink.”

Natalie chuckled and started working the zipper down the rest of the way.

“Oh my God,” Jackie laughed. “Everything. Notebooks, pencils, toys, shoes, all of it. I had to find a pink swimsuit in November because she decided she couldn’t go to lessons in her blue one anymore!”

“Months of strawberry milk and watermelon,” Van added. “She asked for beets with every meal, just because they were pink. Remember that?”

“How could I possibly forget?” Jackie straightened the throw blanket across her and Taissa’s laps. “Her pee turned pink and she ran out of the bathroom screaming bloody murder while you were at work. Nearly gave me a heart attack.”

Nat and Shauna worked together to get the tree upright, fanning the pastel pink branches out until they looked less smooshed.

“Are these all the ornaments?” Misty’s upper body was obscured by an armload of silver baubles in clear packaging. “I couldn’t find hooks.”

“They’re on there,” Van took them from her and set them next to the fireplace.

“You don’t take them off when you put them away?” Misty was aghast, her face pinched with shock.

“Why would we?” Van shrugged. “We’re just gonna put them all back on.”

“That’s bizarre,” Misty shook her head in disapproval. Van shot Jackie and Tai a look, her mouth half-open.

“I’m making popcorn,” Nat called over her shoulder, headed toward the kitchen.

“Like, to string?” Shauna plugged the cord into the outlet and the tree lit up with warm, white lights.

“What is it, 1880?” Nat scoffed. “No, Shauna, to eat. Like normal people do.”

“Music or a movie?” Lottie had the remote in her hand and her teal reading glasses low on her nose. “The sickies can decide.”

“Tai?” Jackie asked.

“Music,” she answered, catching Van’s eye and flashing her a warm smile. “I feel like they’re gonna need our direction.”

“Excuse you,” Van mocked offense, a hand pressed dramatically to her chest. “I know how to decorate a tree, thank you very much.”

Shauna rolled her eyes and passed Van one of the more glittery ornaments, wiping her hands on her jeans to brush the silver dust away.

“Oh, you’re so right,” Jackie grinned at Taissa. “They’d be lost without us.”

24. a thing with you

December 26th, 2021

"So, we have a fan club," Misty announced, a grin plastered on her face that Jackie hadn't seen in over twenty-five years. Ben's amputated leg, Shauna's risky pregnancy, Van's cheek torn in two—Misty in her element.

She stood in front of her whiteboard again, the loose papers in her hands held out like she was waiting for a podium to appear in front of her. This was her big win. Her Oscars, her Grammys, her Nobel fucking Prize.

Misty Quigley, a woman with fans.

"A what?" Natalie choked on her coffee.

"A fan club," Misty repeated, as if the words spoke for themselves.

"I can hear you," Natalie barked. "I meant give me more here."

Shauna's mouth hung open slightly, her eyes narrowed in confusion. Lottie pulled her blanket up to her chin and sank lower on the couch.

"Okay, well," Misty smiled. "You know how people follow us? The details of the crash and the conspiracy theories and the books and the magazines and—"

"We know," Van sighed. She stretched her neck side to side slowly. They'd returned to their original rooms last night and when Shauna and Jackie had stuck their heads into Van and Tai's to say goodnight, Taissa had already been asleep. Van had been lying at an odd angle that Jackie assumed she'd remained in, too stubborn to disturb Tai.

"So this group—2525 Collective—" Misty wrote the name in capital letters in the center of the board with black ink, "—is a bunch of fans who also follow what we're doing like… now, basically."

"Now?" Nat sputtered.

"Yeah. They have stuff about Tai's campaign," Misty nodded at Tai. She swallowed and crossed her arms against her chest. 'Van's bar.' Van shook her head and shifted her weight, leaning closer to Taissa on the loveseat. "And… pictures of us, actually. So… some of them know where we… live."

"What the fuck do you mean—"

"—how long have you known—"

"—buried the goddamn lead!"

"Hey," Shauna's voice cut through the chaos, directed not at Misty but at Jackie.

Jackie had been still and silent, hands pressed to her thighs, brain short-circuiting. This was it. This was the end of her anonymity. She'd known it was coming from the second she

put Shauna's address into her fucking GPS, but she couldn't have prepared herself for how it would feel when it finally hit.

"Jax. Jackie." Shauna's hands were on her shoulders. Jackie blinked her into focus.

"Yeah," she whispered. "Yeah, I'm—I don't know."

Shauna nodded slowly. "It's gonna be okay. Whatever happens, it'll be okay. We've been through far fucking worse."

Jackie smiled for Shauna because she clearly needed it—all big brown eyes and nervously batting lashes and full lower lip pulled between her teeth—even though everything in her was screaming.

"They've got a picture of… the two of you leaving Shauna's house," Misty's eyes were locked on Jackie and Shauna. "Must've been that first night. It's blurry but it's… definitely you."

"What the fuck, Misty?" Shauna snapped, jumping to her feet. "How long have you known that these fucking freaks know where I live? That they know where my fucking kid is? That Jackie's… that…"

"Show us the picture, Misty!" Nat demanded, joining Shauna. "Are you absolutely fucking certain that—"

"Do they have any other pictures?" Tai rose—slower than the other two, the aftereffects of her pneumonia lingering longer than Jackie's had—and joined them. "How long have they been watching us?"

They stood shoulder-to-shoulder, Shauna in the center, Nat and Tai at her sides. They were all taller than Misty, her entire body disappearing behind the wall they made, her squeaky voice buried beneath their demands and accusations.

Jackie couldn't speak. She couldn't move. She was frozen, sitting neatly—hands on her knees and elbows tucked against her sides, legs pressed together from thigh to ankle. Taking up the least amount of space humanly possible. Willing herself to shrink so that she could take up even less.

The couch dipped on either side of her at exactly the same time. Strong arms snaked around her shoulders and pulled her in gently. Van, coaxing her to lean against her chest—coffee and cigarettes and lavender shampoo. Jackie closed her eyes and breathed Van in, wrapping her arms around her waist. Lottie was on her other side. Long, thin fingers that Jackie would've known anywhere. Soft hands that were an enigma—so delicate they never should've been capable of the harm they'd done—playing with Jackie's hair and stroking her back.

This was mourning.

If they slipped down to the floor, they could just as well be sitting shiva. Shauna's aunt being flung from her boyfriend's car when they were nine and Deb begging the girls to sit quietly. Jackie braiding Shauna's hair over and over as she watched her mom sob. Jackie asking Shauna to do hers, because she was making her cuticles bleed and Jackie wanted her hands to be busy because she couldn't stand to watch Shauna hurt herself.

The three of them were losing the life they'd had. It'd been imperfect, but it'd been theirs. Saturday mornings listening to Etta James, making mediocre chocolate chip pancakes for Sadie. Long drives to nowhere just because they could—Van behind the wheel, Jackie riding shotgun, Lottie stretched out in the backseat. Pink Christmas trees and stupidly expensive wine and laying in bed with whoever couldn't get out of it that day, just so that they didn't have to do it alone.

Jackie had always wanted Shauna more than she wanted anything and Van had never stopped loving Taissa and Lottie had held a candle for Natalie her entire fucking life. It was a beautiful thing, this reunion, but it was tearing apart everything they knew. And Jackie Taylor no longer presumed dead and buried was the nail in the coffin. There would be no integration. No simple addition to what they already had.

This motherfucker was going up in flames.

So, while the other women argued, Jackie, Van, and Lottie bowed their heads and made peace with their loss.

Jackie had literally killed to stop this from happening. She'd taken lives. The lives had belonged to shitty fucking men who made a living hunting women who didn't want to be found, without even considering why they wanted to stay hidden. But still. Jackie didn't like killing people. And here she was, on the precipice of the thing she'd murdered to prevent, accepting her fate like it was a shitty assignment at work or a canceled vacation.

Oh well, better luck next time.

Calm had fallen over them, the bickering slowing and the information sinking in. Misty had explained some things, most of which Jackie had failed to pay attention to because the thrum of her own heart combined with the pounding of Van's against her ear was more than enough to overwhelm her senses.

She sat up slowly, her turn to lay hands on the written evidence. She took it from Misty's hands, surveying it with nothing more than passive interest and a lingering sense of dread. Watching a train wreck or reading a particularly gruesome new story. Resigned acceptance.

This group or club or whatever the fuck it was had more on them than they ever could've dreamed. Pictures of all of them—Shauna outside her house, Misty leaving work, Nat entering her motel room, Taissa giving local speeches, Van locking up her bar, Lottie getting her fucking nails done.

Jackie was only featured in one—her car keys in one hand, the other perched on the small of Shauna's back, leading her to her Mercedes parked across the street from the Sadecki residence. It wasn't the best photo. Jackie's face wasn't particularly clear. But if they were looking for her, if they'd made a habit of studying old pictures of her like so many people did—a little girl with a gap in her teeth posing in her soccer uniform, eighteen in her homecoming dress, adorned with a cheap crown and sash—like it was all part of some game, some mystery to be solved, they would know. They wouldn't let this go.

They had theories on their dynamics—who was in love with who and how many of them had stayed in contact and when they saw each other—and they absolutely fucking knew that

they were all together now.

Misty had read the main post aloud, but Jackie hadn't heard a goddamn word she'd said. She clutched the page in her hand, the paper shaking slightly.

29

r/flight2525 · Posted by u/vpofthecollective 4 hours ago.

YELLOWJACKETS REUNITED, CALL TO MEET IN PERSON

meetups

As we all know, **2525bloodmoon**has worked their ass off to collect current photos of every single living yj, including JACKIE TAYLOR. (I don't want a debate on this thread—if you don't think she's alive this post is NOT FOR YOU. Deniers can find a new fucking forum, there are plenty of people out there who are just as wrong as you.) We've worked really hard to protect the anonymity of the surveillers AND the exact addresses of the yj's private residences, so DO NOT ask them who took the photos or where! They will NOT tell you and you WILL be booted from the group!

All of this has been discussed in previous threads, but I wanted to summarize what we have here for those who are still catching up. We KNOW that all seven of the living yjs are together right now (Charlotte Matthews, Vanessa Palmer, Misty Quigley, Shauna Sadecki (née Shipman), Natalie Scattorcio, Jacqueline Taylor, and Taissa Turner). They were spotted at a hotel just over a week ago (hotel name withheld INTENTIONALLY, iykyk) but no one has seen them since. Taissa Turner has been MIA from her state senator elect duties and Van Palmer has not been seen at work (she is usually a hands-on owner and works the bar regularly). The rest of them do not have public lives, so you just have to trust our intel when we say they've been AWOL.

For those of you who are active members, we are having an IN PERSON MEETING to discuss the latest developments. Usual time and place. Additional details can be found if you know where to look. If you want to join us, I suggest you start digging deeper now. Everything you need to prove that you are worthy is accessible to the public, but I am not going to give details. You have to work it out yourself like everyone else because if you can't do that much, you don't have what it takes to join.

p.s. I fucking told you all that Jackie would eventually go to Shauna's house REGARDLESS of the husband drama, **buzzbuzz25**you owe me a drink!!

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buzzbuzz25478 points · 3 hours ago

whatever. you know where i'll be buying but i didn't make promises on quality so gloat too much and it'll be bottom shelf

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RiverGoose897619 points · 2 hours ago

You guys are so out of line. This is encouraging stalking. We all care about these women and follow this case and you can THEORIZE without invading their privacy! Makes me sick.

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Goddamn fucking freaks.

"What color do you want?" Lottie asked, wrapping her long cardigan tight around her waist.

"Red is so hard to lift," Jackie sighed, pulling the ends of her auburn hair forward to inspect them. "Something dark. I don't even care. It's not like it's gonna make a difference."

"It can't hurt to try, Jack," Van slid a bowl of cereal in front of her sternly, passing the spoon directly into her hand. "Nothing's certain until it is."

"I mean," Misty crossed her legs and leaned against the counter, swiveling her barstool to face them, "it is pretty certain. People have been speculating that she was alive for ages, they're not going to give up now that there's photographic evidence."

A beat of silence. Jackie's bite of Cheerios crunched uncomfortably loud.

"There's that Sally Beauty downtown," Lottie shrugged. "Last time you used decent stuff to go from red to blonde it wasn't bad."

"You gonna rob that one too?" Jackie quipped.

"I feel like what you meant to say," Natalie lifted her coffee toward Jackie in a halfhearted cheers, "is thank you."

"Thank you, Natalie," Taissa interjected, her sarcastic tone overpowering Jackie's scoff.

"What do you think, babe?" Jackie turned to Shauna. She froze in place, freshly washed hands dripping over the sink. "Blonde or brunette?"

"What?" Shauna moved slowly, drying her hands carefully with a rag. She rolled her shoulder back. It was a lot better now, Lottie of all people insisting that she stick to a regimen of ibuprofen for the inflammation, along with ice three times a day.

"You can pick," Jackie offered. "I hate choosing. Sadie picked this color."

Shauna didn't say anything. She set the rag aside and walked to Jackie where she sat, tipping her chin up gently to kiss her forehead.

"I'm not gonna pick," Shauna shook her head. "Whatever you think is best. Just… if you really wanna do this, I—" she took a deep, shaky breath. "It's up to you, Jax."

They'd taken a vote. Misty had a theory about one of the places the group met, based on her own research and digging she'd done from a burner account—Natalie had asked her if she was sure that she wasn't in the collective and she'd giggled, waving her off. The bar in

question had been referenced indirectly multiple times—street names and anagrams and euphemisms, Misty had pointed out the lines of text mixed in a jumble of replies—as a meeting place of sorts. A place of interest to the group, it seemed, because it was an unofficial dyke bar only thirty minutes from the house that Jackie, Van, and Lottie had been to plenty of times. Some of the posters even claimed to have spoken to them there before.

The choices were simple: face it head on and smoke the assholes out—Misty, Natalie, and Lottie—or continue to lay low and ignore it—Shauna, Taissa, and Van. Jackie had been the deciding vote, forced to watch Shauna and Van positively wilt as she cast it.

They were going to the bar later that night. A bad fucking idea, but last ditch efforts often are. They would be the bait, luring the freaks in. If this group really frequented it, one of them would notice. Maybe they'd approach them, maybe they'd take the coward's route and hide behind their screens, posting about it later. Or maybe one of the regulars had seen some fucking weirdos loitering. Whatever happened, Jackie wanted fucking answers. She was done hiding. If she was going to be outed, so be it. At least it would be over and she and Shauna could start figuring shit out.

"Blondes have more fun!" Misty chimed, breaking Jackie out of her thoughts. "That's what they say, right?"

Jackie raised a brow at her. It was probably harmless. She was probably just trying to regain some of Jackie's favor with a stupid fucking joke. But Jackie Taylor didn't trust Misty Quigley as far as she could throw her.

"Get me black," she muttered to Lottie. "And a good pair of scissors."

"These creeps seem like kids," Tai swiped some eyeliner across her lids, drawing a subtle and careful wing. "I just don't see why we're wasting our time on them. There's no way they're behind all the actual, serious shit."

They were in the massive master bathroom, getting ready together. Like an after-game house party or a school dance pregame—the seven of them sharing makeup and talking over the rumble of hair dryers and trying on different outfits for yays or nays from the group.

"No," Natalie shrugged, pouring herself another glass of wine and sinking down to sit on the ledge of the tub, "but they're fucking obsessed with us. They're stalking us. Odds are they're the best lead we have. If they've seen us, they might've seen them."

"What're we gonna do, though?" Shauna tipped Jackie's head back. She was sitting on the counter cross-legged, Jackie perched in front of it on Lottie's vanity chair, rinsing the dark dye off in the sink. "Threaten them in public for whatever they have?"

"Or, Shauna," Van rolled the sleeves of her muted orange button-up, fastening them just beneath her elbows, "we could talk to them. Y'know, like normal people would? Appeal to their… weird fucking interest in us and ask for their help and see if that works."

"But if that doesn't?" Shauna shot back, handing Jackie a towel to wrap around her wet hair.

“Well, then… yeah,” Van acquiesced sheepishly. “We threaten them. They’re probably kids, like Tai said. They’ll fold easy.”

“See?” Shauna smiled smugly, hopping down off of the counter.

“I think they really do care about us,” Misty scrunched mouse into her damp hair. “In their… special way. I bet they’ll help if they can.”

“I’m just excited to get out of this fucking house,” Lottie blinked mascara onto her lashes. “And… I do think they know something. It just… seems like they do.”

Jackie pulled her hair into a ponytail, high on top of her head, and took the shears to the ends.

“Just…” Shauna paused, blush and powder brush in her limp hands, “Just… maybe this is all gonna blow over. Maybe we gave whoever wanted something from us what they wanted already and that’s why they’ve been leaving us alone. Maybe we should… split up. What if we’re making things worse, doing this? Calling attention to ourselves?”

“Shauna,” Nat stood behind her, resting a hand on her shoulder and making eye contact with her in the mirror, “have you ever had any friends since we got back that weren’t part of an act?”

“What do you mean?” Shauna frowned. “Of course I’ve had friends, I’m not—”

“This isn’t a judgment, Shipman,” Nat interrupted. Jackie jumped at the name, the scissors slipping. It looked like she was going to go shorter than she’d intended. “This applies to all of us. Have you ever had a real friend? Someone you told shit to. Like deep shit. Not someone you were fucking or someone who happened to be another… PTA mom or whatever the hell.”

“As if Shauna is on the goddamn PTA,” Taissa chuckled.

“Whatever,” Nat rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“No,” Shauna admitted quietly. “I guess I haven’t, really.”

“Right. Neither have I,” Nat let her hand slide off of Shauna and turned to face the room. “None of us have actual fucking friends. Do you guys get how fucking weird that it?”

“We were the lucky ones,” Lottie said quietly, looking from Van to Jackie. “We… only got through it because we had each other.”

Natalie nodded, grimacing.

“That’s why Travis and I… even though he fucking sucked half the time, we—fuck—” Taissa reached up from her spot on the floor, taking Nat’s hand in her own loosely. ‘Why do you think we fell back into these insane fucking relationships so quick?’ Natalie continued. “We don’t have anyone else. We’re never gonna have anyone else. No one will ever understand us like we understand each other.”

“She’s right,” Jackie let her hair down and shook it out—newly shoulder-length and dark. “We’re still a fucking team. Whether we like it or not, we’ll never have anyone else the way we have each other.”

"And we were always strongest playing offense," Nat grinned. "So let's sort these fuckers out."

"Oh my God," Taissa shook her head. Her hair was down—long curls brushing against her shoulder blades. She wore a black blouse, thin and simple, with a long, heavy jacket over it. She looked stunning, a light sweep of violet shadow on her lids and muted red lipstick. Van kept a hand on her waist, convinced she might stumble any second, even though Taissa was feeling mostly back to normal—insisting, in fact, that she felt better than she had in months because of the sleep she'd been forced to get. (Jackie'd thought that she was pushing it with that claim, but she'd backed her up anyway when Shauna and Van had tried to argue—you don't know her body better than she does, so lay off). "These women recognize you three. You've totally fucking cruised here, haven't you?"

Van blushed from her forehead to her neck—a pale pink that was barely noticeable in the dark of the bar. Her hair stood out—the same beautiful, silky red it'd always been—against the pale fabric of her shirt.

"We've—I mean, yeah, we've been here," she cleared her throat, leading them to the large booth in the back corner, her eyes trained on the toes of her boots. "It's a… well, it's basically a lesbian bar in the middle of a… not very lesbian area."

Lottie laughed, the sound of it cutting through the din of 2000s pop music they always seemed to be playing. She glanced at the dance floor to the left of the bar, not too packed but not as empty as a Sunday evening might usually call for. Sunday was actually a busy day for Wildrose—half-off well liquor, a deal aimed mostly at the closeted women drinking and flirting after a day of church and kids sports games and idiot husbands demanding that Monday's lunch be packed and suit be pressed. Lottie tugged at the hem of her dress, straightening the dusty rose skirt over the black tights she'd thrown on to keep warm. Jackie knew she was taking inventory of the women there because, yeah… of course they'd all cruised here before.

Shauna raised an eyebrow at Jackie. She looked surreal. A tight, navy blue top with a plunging neckline that clung to her curves. Dark jeans, snug on her hips. Her eyes were lined perfectly with black, mascara coating her long lashes. The only thing Jackie would've changed would be to rip off the gray jacket she'd shrugged on as they walked out the door, covering most of her upper body.

Jackie smiled, slipping a hand into her back pocket as they followed Van and Taissa. Jackie's hair was near black, a long bob that skimmed her shoulders. She'd let it sit in its natural wave, rather than straightening it or curling it. She wore jeans too, lighter wash than Shauna's. Her top was a sunny yellow, long-sleeves and a sweetheart neckline. It was form-fitting, the faux corset type. Shauna seemed to appreciate it greatly, her dark eyes struggling to focus on Jackie's when she looked at her.

"I've slept with a few women I met here," Jackie admitted calmly. "But none of them looked anywhere near as hot as you do right now," she added in Shauna's ear.

"What do we want to drink?" Nat asked, as Jackie and Shauna sank into the chairs opposite the booth, Van, Tai, and Lottie already sitting. She was dressed the most casually of

any of them, a loose tee that somehow looked really fucking good, the way it sat on her frame, and black jeans tucked into her boots. Heavy makeup, messy hair, a conspiratorial smile. “Misty can help me carry a round.”

Misty nodded excitedly. She looked shockingly normal—subtle makeup and a tight black camisole under a casual green jacket. She and Nat made sense standing next to each other in this bar, which sent a fucking chill through Jackie’s spine.

Everyone but Tai and Van sipped on a drink—Tai still recovering and Van acting as their DD—while they watched the women around them. There was nothing out of the ordinary. Dykes taking shots and dancing sloppily and making out against the wall. No men, no awkward faces, no flashing neon sign that said “Yellowjackets Fan Club.”

There was, however, a girl with pretty blond hair and bright green eyes, staring at Jackie from across the room.

Fuck.

“Is that—” Van had noticed too, craning her neck to get a better look.

“Of course she’s here,” Lottie groaned, following Van’s gaze. “But… wait, this could be good, right? We said we’d ask any regulars we saw, and Amelia is definitely a fucking regular.”

“Who’s Amelia?” Shauna twisted in her seat and found her immediately, taking in the short dress that matched her eyes and the long line of her crossed legs. Her expression soured. “Oh. Amelia, huh?” she tossed her drink back, gulping more than sipping.

Misty, Nat, and Taissa all craned their necks and Amelia tilted her head at Jackie in question.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Oh my God,” Jackie snapped quietly. ‘Can everyone stop staring at her for a fucking second?’ They did, Shauna’s glare lingering the longest. “Thank you, fuck. Okay, she’s a regular. I’ve… hooked up with her a few times, but it’s been like two years. She’s here a lot, though. And she’s… observant. If anyone’s noticed something, it’s her.”

Jackie slipped her hand onto Shauna’s thigh beneath the table, squeezing. She didn’t react.

“So you should go talk to her,” Nat nodded, “what are we waiting for?”

“The thing is…” Jackie started, eyeing Shauna carefully. Her expression was infuriatingly neutral. “She’s… well, we’re not exactly…”

“She’s fucking batshit,” Van rubbed her temple slowly, “and she holds a grudge. And Emma’s broken her heart one too many times.”

(Van had quizzed them in the car—demanding that they repeat back the name that Jackie had always used at Wildrose.)

“Broken her heart is extreme,” Jackie argued. “We’ve never even technically dated.”

“Oh, but she fucking wanted to,” Lottie picked at the basket of fries in front of her. “And you sorta let her think you might.”

“Okay, this is so not the point,” Jackie slid her hand higher on Shauna’s thigh. Shauna covered it with her own, but it felt reflexive rather than intentional.

“What is the point?” Tai leaned back, her head against the tall booth seat. “Do you think you can get her to talk or no? Because otherwise, this whole night was a fucking bust.”

“She can get her to talk,” Van sighed. “It’s just… the way she’s gonna have to do it.”

“What does that mean?” Misty frowned, cocking her head to the side. “Like… threats? Because I thought we agreed to hold off on—”

“Not threats,” Lottie rolled her eyes. “Flirting. She’s just gonna have to flirt with her a little. She can handle it, she’s good at that.”

Shauna crossed her legs, Jackie’s hand sliding off her lap.

“There’s this girl I hooked up with a while back. She seemed to know you. Or at least, she knew of you,” Amelia explained. She leaned closer, her calf sliding against Jackie’s and her delicate hand finding her knee. “Real strange. Said she was convinced that you were part of some… cult. Anyway, she said she was in this group. Some conspiracy theorist shit, I dunno. I didn’t meet with her again but I see her around from time to time.”

Everyone had agreed that Jackie ought to risk seeing what Amelia knew. She’d warmed her up for a few minutes, Shauna’s eyes burning holes in the back of her fucking head, before asking her outright if she’d noticed anything weird lately.

“Did she say anything else? I’m pretty sure she’s, like, fucking stalking me, Mia,” Jackie covered her hand with her own, rubbing her index finger over her knuckles lightly. “I need a little more to work with here.”

Amelia sighed, brushing her hair to the side with her free hand so that her loose curls all rested over one shoulder.

“She said they usually meet at the restaurant she works at, after hours,” she added. “Riccardo’s, you know that old Italian place?”

“Yeah, I do,” Jackie chewed her lip. “What was her name?”

“Savannah.”

“Last name?”

“Didn’t get one,” Amelia shrugged.

“Of course you didn’t,” Jackie laughed before she could help it.

“Do you know mine, Em?” Amelia smirked, her already very pretty face twisting into something even prettier.

“Point taken. Did you keep her phone number, by chance?”

“I am not giving you her fucking number. Unless…” Amelia moved closer, her hand sliding up a few inches and her lips brushing against Jackie’s ear, “you make a really

compelling case."

Jackie took both of her shoulders in her hands, pushing back lightly until she sat up straight.

"You don't even have it, do you?"

"Nope, deleted it," Amelia crossed her arms and shook her head. "She was weird fucking vibes. Be careful if you go looking for her."

"I will be," Jackie hopped off the barstool abruptly. "Thanks."

"Wait," Amelia scoffed. "That's it?"

"That's it," Jackie patted her on the back briefly. "My girlfriend's got a temper, I really gotta get back."

Shauna sat with her arms crossed tight against her chest, her jacket still on despite the heat of the bar. Jackie had recounted her and Amelia's conversation to the other women, glossing over the aspects that she'd assumed would make Shauna's head spin, before running to the bathroom with Lottie.

Shauna was clearly ignoring whatever Misty was saying to her. Jackie walked toward her and she glanced up briefly before staring stubbornly at her drink. Familiarity settled over Jackie. Shauna watching her from a distance. Shauna mad as hell. Jealous, but refusing to admit it. The beautiful difference was that now she and Jackie were together, truly and explicitly, so Jackie could calm her frayed nerves without fear.

Jackie swooped in behind Shauna, bending forward at the waist to wrap her arms around her shoulders and pressing her nose to her cheek. Shauna didn't move.

"And then I had to take Caligula to the vet, because he'd gotten into the—"

Jackie tuned out Misty's chatter.

"Why don't you take that coat off," Jackie ran her fingers over the seam, "and come dance with me?"

"I don't feel like dancing," Shauna tilted her neck away, her ear practically touching her opposite shoulder. "And it's cold in here."

Jackie sighed, but pulled back a little. She shifted her hands to Shauna's shoulders and added distance between her lips and Shauna's ear.

"I'm sure I can warm you up," she tried to sound playful, to rope Shauna in.

"I don't really like dancing, Jackie," Shauna feigned interest in Misty, zeroing in on her suddenly.

It was going to have to be all or nothing to turn this night around. Jackie took a deep breath. She reached down to the seat of the wooden chair and yanked it out, swiveling Shauna to the side.

Nat raised a brow. Tai and Van turned inward at the same time, their knees bumping and their eyes trained on each other. Lottie flashed Jackie a smile. Misty kept blathering. Shauna frowned but, before she could protest, Jackie sank down onto her lap, straddling her thighs and resting her arms around her neck.

“Okay, y’know what,” Nat stood and Lottie filled the space, sliding closer to Van and Tai so that they were all one unit, “that’s our cue, Misty. Let’s go get another drink.”

Shauna sucked air through her teeth and watched the two of them walk toward the bar. Her hands came up tentatively, grasping the relatively safe territory of Jackie’s waist.

Jackie lifted Shauna’s chin, guiding her focus to her. Shauna swallowed, glancing at everyone around them. Jackie remembered that look—the can we really do this here panic. She’d had it often—every new city, every new bar that wasn’t clearly for dykes.

“Baby,” Jackie took both of Shauna’s cheeks between her hands, “it’s a lesbian bar. I promise they expect there to be lesbians.”

“You would know, I guess,” Shauna’s tone was biting. “Seems like you’ve taken advantage of that.” Her eyes were cold. She was fucking pissed, even more so than Jackie had expected.

“You’re being fucking mean.”

The words tumbled out. Jackie had meant to maintain control of the situation, to joke and jostle Shauna back to neutral. Maybe even get her to enjoy herself a little. But the back of her throat was hot and her eyes were wet with tears because she hadn’t wanted to fucking flirt for information. She didn’t enjoy feeling like a fucking plaything or a tool or whatever the fuck it made her when she batted her eyes transactionally and let someone imagine fucking her. And now Shauna was pissed and Jackie was stuck in this horrible feeling, amplified times ten, because her girlfriend was looking at her like she was a fucking slut, even though she’d been part of this fucking plan.

Shauna was leaving Jackie alone in it.

“I’m sorry,” Shauna softened. She circled Jackie’s waist, drawing her closer. Less robotic, more them. “I’m just… this is new to me. This is a lot.”

“Do you want me to move?” Jackie asked gently.

“No,” Shauna held her tighter. She plead with her eyes—the look that she gave when she wanted to move on without actually addressing the way she’d snapped.

Jackie indulged her.

“I’ll forgive you if you kiss me,” she grinned, brushing the hair off of Shauna’s forehead.

“Really?” Shauna scrunched her nose.

“Really truly,” Jackie cupped her jaw and closed half of the distance between them. “I think that’s a pretty good deal on your end.”

“Mmm,” Shauna bridged the rest of the gap, kissing Jackie delicately.

Jackie deepened it—slowly, waiting for Shauna to adjust to each move of her lips or her tongue—until Shauna sighed so pretty into her mouth.

“Why won’t you come dance with me?” Jackie mumbled against her lips.

“I’m really not in the mood.” The ice was back in her tone. Jackie looked over her shoulder, to see what Shauna had zeroed in suddenly. Amelia was behind them, glancing over from her barstool.

“I knew you’d get like this,” Jackie whined. “Act all broody about it.”

“How am I supposed to act about it?” Shauna shook her head.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe like it was a scheme to get something for us and it worked and now it’s done and I literally just flirted a tiny bit and it really wasn’t a big deal and now we’re already here,” Jackie played with the collar of Shauna’s jacket as she spoke, “so maybe you should get your sexy ass up and dance with your girlfriend who loves you and doesn’t want anyone else on the entire fucking planet?”

“I’m sorry,” Shauna swallowed, shifting her gaze up to the ceiling. “It’s just that I… used to have to watch you do that shit all the fucking time and it feels the same, even though I know logically it isn’t, I just…”

Oh.

Fuck.

“Oh, baby,” Jackie soothed, pressing her forehead to Shauna’s temple. ‘I’m sorry. It’s over though, yeah?’ Shauna nodded slowly. “And you know what… I was such a good actress because I knew you were watching me and I knew you’d be jealous. And jealous you is sort of a major fucking turn on for me.” Shauna laughed a little. “So… how about you take all this possessive energy and channel it into dancing with me, hmm? You can show everybody exactly who I belong to.”

Shauna hissed in a breath, her fingers digging into Jackie’s sides. Jackie pulled back to look at her, smiling innocently. She slipped her hands under Shauna’s jacket and Shauna finally let her shake it from her arms.

“Fuck,” Jackie mumbled, staring at her chest with absolutely no subtlety. Jackie’s cup was empty, so she reached across Shauna for what was left of her drink, throwing it back in one go. Shauna smirked at her as she set the glass back on the table, the same smirk she gave when they were eighteen and Jackie snuck her beer away from her at a party. “You look amazing.”

“Do you mean I look amazing, or do you mean you can see my boobs now?” Shauna chuckled.

“Both,” Jackie chewed her lip. “You’re gorgeous, baby. I need to dance with you. Please?”

“I’m not used to… dancing like this,” Shauna’s cheeks burned crimson.

“Don’t worry, I’ll lead,” Jackie winked and stood, offering Shauna her hands.

Jackie tugged until Shauna rose to her feet. She buried her face in the crook of Jackie’s neck, drunk and shy, just like she’d gotten when they were teens and the crowd was too big or too rowdy.

Jackie hummed and rubbed her back. “They need to know who you belong to, too.”

“No one is into me,” Shauna laughed.

“You,” Jackie squeezed her waist, “have always, always, always been oblivious to when people are checking you out.”

Shauna loosened up. They danced and drank and traded sloppy kisses until the other women herded them back to the car. It was as close to perfect as things could get just then and Jackie reveled in it.

“Baaaaaby?” Jackie called, reaching down to slip her socks off. She missed the first time, past tipsy and into drunk.

“I’m right here!” Shauna laughed.

“Nuh-uh!” Jackie argued. Shauna stepped out of the bathroom, holding the door frame with one hand. She was drunk, too—her cheeks a pretty pink and her eyes lit up. “If you were right here, you’d be right here.” Jackie reached out with both arms, making an exaggerated grabbing motion.

Jackie sat back, her weight in her hands and her feet planted on the floor. She let her eyes fall closed as she listened to Shauna’s laugh build, sweet and light, until she felt her presence in front of her. She opened her eyes and grinned.

“Hi, beautiful,” she blinked slowly, taking in Shauna’s body from head to toe. She’d slipped her jeans off the second they got to their room, leaving her in black underwear and her low cut top.

“Hi,” Shauna ran a hand through Jackie’s hair, “did you need something?”

“Duh,” Jackie grabbed her hips and pulled until she fell forward, holding Jackie’s shoulders for stability. “You.”

“I just wanna get ready for bed, Jax,” Shauna protested, even as she climbed on top of Jackie, straddling her lap on her knees.

“I’m here,” Jackie murmured, ‘you’re here,’ she pecked Shauna’s lips a few times, pulling away to tease her when she chased after her, “what else is there to get ready?”

Shauna took Jackie’s head firmly between her hands, dragging her close enough to really kiss her. Jackie met the kiss eagerly. She pulled Shauna closer, slipping her hands under her shirt to hold her ribs. Her fingers brushed just beneath the band of Shauna’s bra. Shauna whimpered, jolting her hips forward against Jackie’s lap and desperately pushing her tongue further into Jackie’s mouth.

They hadn’t really had sex in nearly a week, Jackie sick and Shauna worried out of her mind and Misty dropping fanclub bombs. It’d taken everything in Jackie not to lead Shauna to the bathroom at the fucking bar, but that seemed too ill-advised for the current circumstances, even by their warped standards. Jackie moved one hand lower, sliding it

between their bodies towards Shauna's waistband, and pushed the other higher on her chest, cupping her breast over the thin material of her bra.

"Wait," Shauna broke the kiss suddenly, catching Jackie's wrist before her fingers could dip lower. "Just… I want…"

She blushed—pink fanning out from where it was most concentrated, the very tip of her nose—and bit her lip. Jackie returned to her previous perch, holding Shauna's sides steadily. She dipped her head to drop a kiss to Shauna's chest—right in the center, just above the line of her cleavage.

"What do you want, baby?" Jackie asked, blinking up at her. Shauna threaded both hands though Jackie's hair, holding it back off of her face. "You can tell me."

Shauna hesitated, mouth open but no sound coming other than shaky, raspy breaths. Her eyes were dark. Jackie could tell how fucking turned on she was. She let one hand fall to Shauna's thigh, squeezing as she waited.

Shauna gasped as if Jackie had circled her clit—she was so on edge, so sensitive. It didn't make sense that she'd stop Jackie from touching her, unless she wanted something in particular, something that she was scared to ask for.

"My sweet girl," Jackie whispered against the base of her neck. "Tell me—" Jackie dragged her tongue along the center of her throat, "—what you want—" closed her lips against the skin there, "—so I can make you feel good."

Shauna moaned, shifting her hips slightly.

"I—I—" Shauna whimpered. Jackie nodded to encourage her, letting her chin bob against the top of Shauna's breasts. "I want it like we… used to… fuck—I just wanna—" Shauna ground her hips down hard in a circle, both of them moaning as she slid against Jackie's lap, "—that. I wanna do that like we… used to if you… want that."

"Fucking hell," Jackie groaned, hands automatically flying to Shauna's hips and digging in. Shauna's eyes lit up, almost as if she was shocked that Jackie was into this for some reason. "Yes. Yes, I want that."

Shauna kissed her again—spit and teeth and sloppy open mouths. Jackie readjusted, centering one thigh between Shauna's legs and tensing it, and yanked hard on Shauna's hips, pulling her forward and down.

Shauna gasped into her mouth, rocking her own hips back and forth in a slow, careful rhythm. Jackie clung to her, fingers finding purchase on the bare skin above her waistband. She didn't push further, just focused on kissing Shauna, letting her lips and tongue and teeth trail down her neck. She knew what Shauna had meant. She didn't just want to grind against Jackie—she wanted to recreate a time where they didn't go further. Jackie couldn't slip her fingers down and find her clit, she couldn't rip her shirt off and toss her bra aside. They wouldn't have done that then. Jackie could just run her tongue across Shauna's collar bone and urge her hips to rock faster and listen to her moans build louder, grow wilder.

"You're so fucking pretty, Shauna," Jackie moaned against her chest, glancing up to catch her reaction.

Jackie mostly called her beautiful now or gorgeous, but she remembered calling her pretty back then. Jackie called her baby when they fucked. Or love. Or good girl. She wouldn't have then, though. She would've called her Shauna or Shipman and one of those was off the table now, so Jackie said her first name like it was something precious.

Shauna screwed her eyes shut and cried out, slamming her hips down in fast, erratic circles. Jackie gripped the back of her head and forced their lips together, swallowing Shauna's moans, as she fought to hold steady to Shauna's bucking hips with her other hand. Shauna's abdomen jerked, her muscles twitching sharply. She whined against Jackie's lips, trying to pull away, but Jackie held her there, kissing her harder because Jackie had always, always kissed her breathless when they'd done this.

Shauna stopped moving. Intentionally, at least—her body still shaking at odd intervals. Jackie freed her lips, letting her arms fall down to wrap tight around Shauna's waist, and she immediately buried her face in the crook of Jackie's neck.

"I love you," Jackie whispered, emotion hitting her—raw and sort of indistinguishable. Regret, guilt, gratitude, something… deep to what they were doing right now that she couldn't put her finger on. "That was very fucking hot."

"Love you," Shauna chuckled against her, nudging her nose against the side of Jackie's throat. 'Can we keep doing this?' she asked quietly. "Slow like this?"

Jackie's breath hitched thinking about all the meanings that could have. Slow like this.

"Yeah," Jackie nodded, running a hand through Shauna's messy hair. "We have time for whatever you want. If anyone bothers us tonight, I give you full permission to tell them to fuck off."

Shauna laughed and sat up, arms still around Jackie's neck, shaking her hair behind her.

"You can't take that back," she smiled.

"I'm not gonna," Jackie squeezed her waist. "When you say… keep doing this. Are we… is this, like, sort of… pretending we're younger again?"

"I guess, in a way?" Shauna blushed a true red. "I mean, I don't want to literally pretend we're eighteen, just more… I imagined all the ways I would've done things with you for the first time and we've had some… fucking incredible sex, just…"

"It's been very intense," Jackie supplied. "Like… we skipped some steps. I know what you mean."

"Yeah," Shauna slid off of Jackie's lap and pushed herself up against the headboard, opening her arms. "I just wanna… look at you."

Jackie grinned, wondering if that would forever be a joke that wasn't really a joke between them, and straddled Shauna's lap.

"We can do that," Jackie rested her forehead against Shauna's, looping her arms around her neck. Shauna's hands dug into her hips.

When Shauna kissed her, Jackie met her pace. Minutes of relatively chaste kisses, lips moving slowly against each other and fuck, Jackie found this hot but she was shifting her

thighs in search of some relief. Her clit was throbbing and at this rate it would be a long time before Shauna addressed the ache. Shauna slipped her tongue into Jackie's mouth, Jackie moaning in true satisfaction just for that. Shauna tugged the hem of Jackie's shirt up to her navel, breaking the kiss to meet Jackie's eyes. Jackie nodded quickly, raising her arms over her head. Shauna undressed her, shirt set aside carefully, bra unhooked but straps still resting on Jackie's shoulders.

Shauna started in on Jackie's neck, working her way down her collar bone slowly as she dragged her fingertips lightly up and down her sides. Jackie shivered, groans spilling out of her, and jolted forward a bit. Shauna smiled against her skin, blowing cool air lightly over her cleavage. Jackie shivered again, Shauna watching as goosebumps erupted on her skin. She'd been getting used to this—Jackie having a chill run through her or her hair raising on end. It almost seemed like Shauna wanted it to happen in a controlled environment. Exposure therapy, or something of the like.

"Shauna," Jackie whimpered, "please."

Shauna nodded, finally sliding Jackie's bra off of her arms and throwing it aside. Jackie licked her lips, watching Shauna take her in. Shauna pressed a gentle kiss between her breasts, hands coming up to cup them. Jackie moaned and ground her hips down as Shauna stayed there, forehead against her breastbone, thumbs drawing barely there circles against her nipples. She was so wet already she felt like she was bleeding. When Shauna had said slow, she'd apparently meant it.

Shauna sucked hickeys onto Jackie's breasts, rolling her nipples between frustratingly gentle fingers.

"Harder," Jackie begged, rocking her hips back and forth. "Please, harder."

Shauna pinched tight, continued to roll slowly. Jackie gasped and circled her hips down.

"Your… your mouth, Shauna," Jackie tried to force her head a few inches to the side, closer to where she wanted it, "please."

Shauna sucked Jackie's nipple into her mouth once, pulled back to run the seam of her lips against it. Jackie cried out, a knot building low in her stomach, and shoved Shauna closer by the back of her head.

Shauna took her nipple back between her lips, sucking hard this time. Jackie clung to her, jerking her hips harder and faster and watching Shauna's head bob at her chest, alternating between breasts. Jackie forced her hips down at just the right angle and came with a shriek—suddenly and unexpectedly.

Shauna pulled back, tugging Jackie's nipple with her teeth, biting down hard enough that Jackie's breast stretched with the movement.

"Fuck," Jackie gasped.

Shauna released her and flashed her that cocky, one-sided smile of hers.

"Do you want more?" Shauna asked, running her thumb over Jackie's bottom lip.

"Uh-huh," Jackie wiggled her hips. "Touch me."

Shauna's eyes went soft and unfocused as she nodded. She helped guide Jackie off of her lap and onto her back. She unbuttoned Jackie's jeans and Jackie raised her hips for her. It took what felt like ages for Shauna to slide her pants off and come back up to hook a finger under her panties. Jackie lifted her hips again, but Shauna surged forward instead of moving down, covering Jackie's body with her own.

Their lips met—immediately deep and passionate this time—and Jackie quickly pulled Shauna's shirt off, waiting for a tiny nod of assent from Shauna before tearing her bra off along with it.

Shauna reached down, brushing two fingers over the front of Jackie's soaked underwear. Jackie moaned, breaking the kiss and digging her head back into the pillows.

"Take… take them off," Jackie begged breathlessly.

Shauna slid them off as slowly as she had the pants. Jackie felt herself clenching around nothing in anticipation.

Shauna returned to the head of the bed with her, laid on her side, propping herself up on her elbow so that she could stare down at Jackie. Her fingers pushed a trail down Jackie's stomach and Jackie spread her hips wider as Shauna got closer to where she wanted her.

Shauna panted, lips parted a few inches, eyes scanning Jackie's body from her head to her toes and back again, and when she slid one delicate finger against Jackie's folds, Jackie cried out and bucked her hips off the bed.

Shauna took her time, running her finger up and down over and over—the only sounds in the room their ragged breaths and Jackie's slick wetness. Shauna brought two fingers to Jackie's entrance, circling without pushing inside her.

"You feel so fucking good," she moaned.

Jackie whimpered, hips opening further as if that could force Shauna inside her. Shauna ran her fingers back up and found Jackie's clit, resting still against it for a moment, her eyes wide with awe.

"It's so swollen," she whispered.

"Fuck," Jackie nodded enthusiastically, "because—because I want you so fucking bad, Shauna."

One finger, a light half circle against her. Jackie's thighs quaked.

"Fuck," Shauna groaned, readjusting to lay with her forehead against Jackie's temple.

Her finger nudged carefully under the hood of Jackie's clit, like she was finding the perfect angle. Every minuscule movement had Jackie jerking with a fresh shock of pleasure.

"Shauna," Jackie pleaded, "I need more. Please."

Two fingers, pressing down hard, full circles against her. Jackie whined and arched her back. Shauna panted in her ear.

"Yes, yes, yes. Shauna—fuck."

Shauna took Jackie's earlobe between her lips, sucking once before releasing it and moving lower, dipping her tongue just beneath Jackie's jaw.

"Does that feel good?" she rasped against Jackie's skin.

"Uh-huh," Jackie whimpered. "So—so—fuck—good."

Shauna nodded slowly, moaning with Jackie.

"Inside," Jackie pleaded, fingers circling low on Shauna's forearm and pulling her closer to her center. "Please, I—I want you inside."

Shauna pushed one finger into Jackie, curling it immediately, her thumb trained on her clit. Jackie bucked her hips against her hand, struggling to match the rhythm with how fucking frenzied she was for Shauna's touch.

"So pretty," Shauna's voice was heavy in her ear.

Jackie gripped her forearm hard, walls contracting around her finger. Shauna didn't slow down or speed up—she held steady while Jackie shook and rocked wildly.

"Oh, oh, oh!" Jackie cried. "Yes! Yes, I'm gonna—oh, fuck, Shauna, I'm—"

Stars burst behind her eyelids—gold and white flecks. Her toes curled under and her heels dug into the mattress.

Shauna's hand slowed, but she didn't move it. Jackie felt her press a kiss to her forehead and opened her eyes. Shauna's neck hovered over her—she lifted her chin to press a kiss to the hollow at the base of it. Shauna hummed and kissed her temple, her fingers coming to a near stop.

"More," Jackie begged—or maybe directed, her tone insistent. "Please, baby, make me come again."

Shauna inhaled sharply and readjusted, getting herself to an angle where she could thrust two more fingers into Jackie hard. As she shifted, she pulled up and forward a little, creating some space between their bodies and fucking hell, letting her breasts hover right over Jackie's face.

Jackie caught her before she could fully sit up because honestly, she'd give up rocking against Shauna's fingers if she had to in order to fully appreciate her body right now.

Jackie had always loved Shauna's boobs. She'd always admired them, always wanted to touch them, always felt hot guilt in her stomach for staring at Shauna's chest at parties, for imaging crossing the room and lifting them out of the bra she'd helped Shauna pick out and the dress she'd helped her zip up and testing their weight in her hands or closing her lips around her pale pink nipples.

There were nights Jackie got so worked up—watching sweat bead above the neckline of Shauna's red dress or watching her lean forward to throw a ball in beer pong, her cleavage on full display—that she swore that if she knew Shauna would be okay with it, if she knew it wasn't a threat to their friendship, she would've done in it front of everyone.

Jackie locked her hands behind Shauna's upper back and yanked her forward, lifting her head off the mattress at the same time to close the distance. She cupped both her breasts in her hands, so beautifully heavy at this angle, and planted kisses between them.

Shauna seemed to understand what Jackie wanted, holding her weight in one hand near Jackie's head, a position that allowed Jackie full access to her. She kept fucking her, three crooked fingers slamming against her walls, but she couldn't work her clit with her thumb at this angle. Instead, she let her palm press against Jackie as she thrust into her.

It took Jackie longer to finish like this—the pleasure more dispersed. Jackie was in fucking heaven. She kneaded Shauna's breasts in greedy handfuls, more focused on her own enjoyment of them than Shauna's pleasure for the first time, though Shauna's moans seemed to indicate that she wasn't displeased by any means.

Jackie put her mouth all over her, sometimes sucking just her nipple between her lips, sometimes as much of her breast as she could. She held Shauna's sides occasionally, releasing her breasts to let them bounce over her as Shauna put her whole body into fucking her. She nipped and licked and sucked frantically. She ran her tongue over the sweat pooling on Shauna's skin and, when she came undone, she sank her teeth into her gently.

Shauna sat up on her knees after Jackie stopped quaking, staring at her in a dazed sort of shock. Jackie bit her lip and assessed the damage she'd done—red that would soon deepen to purple covered most of Shauna's chest. Her nipples were more erect than Jackie had ever seen them, even pinker than usual. There was a light indent from her teeth on Shauna's left breast, one that would fade soon, but Jackie was still surprised that she could see from a few feet away.

Shauna just stared at her, like she was seeing her for the first time all over again. A sting of embarrassment spread from Jackie's neck up to her cheeks because she hadn't been this… enthusiastic with Shauna yet. She hadn't been unbridled and fucking… feral about her like this and she hadn't planned on it but something in her had snapped and now Shauna was blinking at her wide, shocked eyes.

Oh my God.

Jackie covered her face with her hands and closed her knees, folding in on herself.

"Hey," Shauna said, oh so softly, "baby, what's wrong?"

Jackie felt Shauna lay next to her.

"Nothing," Jackie mumbled. "Just… that was a lot, I know."

Shauna pulled her hands away from her face and Jackie scrunched her nose in protest. Shauna laid on her side facing Jackie. She wore a fucking gorgeous smile, her eyes shining. Her hair was plastered to her forehead and the sides of her neck with sweat.

"I mean, yeah," Shauna trailed a hand up Jackie's thigh. "A lot in the best fucking way. That was… I really liked that."

Shauna blushed and Jackie smiled cautiously, rolling to face her.

"Yeah?" Jackie asked, brushing her hair back gently.

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt that… wanted in my entire fucking life.”

“I’ve always wanted you like that,” Jackie let her hand trail down Shauna’s neck. “I just thought maybe that was a little too much for you. You looked surprised, that’s all.”

“It wasn’t too much,” Shauna took Jackie’s hand in her own and guided it down her body. ‘I liked it,’ she held Jackie’s hand over her center and turned her hips out a bit. “A lot.”

Shauna guided Jackie’s fingers to where she wanted them and Jackie groaned. She was impossibly warm, impossibly wet. Jackie slipped her underwear off quickly. She collected some of her wetness on her fingertips and drew them back up to rub her clit slowly—teasing a little, like Shauna had done with her, but Shauna didn’t seem to mind. Her eyes rolled shut, her gasping breaths punctuated by quiet moans.

Jackie rolled Shauna onto her back, propped up against the pillows, and kneeled next to her. Shauna ran her hands all over Jackie’s torso as Jackie slid her fingers inside her, marveling at the heat of her right now. Jackie got her close to the edge, her fingers moving quicker with each thrust, her thumb working her clit. Shauna’s whimpers were quieter than usual—not reserved, not like she was enjoying herself any less, but… something almost sweeter than her typical.

She rested both hands on Jackie’s chest, playing with her breasts occasionally, but mostly running her fingertips up to her shoulders and back down. Her eyes were shut and the muscles in her face were more relaxed than they usually were when she was this close—walls clenching, thighs quivering. She looked almost… meditative.

Jackie tried to move down her body, wanting to get her mouth on her, but Shauna’s eyes flew open. She sat up, reaching under Jackie’s arms to hold her shoulders from behind and pull her closer. Jackie’s fingers stilled as Shauna buried her face in the crook of her neck and clung to her, sweat causing them to slip against each other as she hugged Jackie close.

“No, don’t stop,” Shauna begged, shaking her head. “Don’t stop.”

Jackie started fucking her again—slow and gentle—focused on the hitch of her breaths against her own neck and the way she clung to her desperately.

“Shauna—” she said softly, wrapping her free arm around her back and moving her fingers a little faster.

“I just,” Shauna’s fingers dug into the back of Jackie’s shoulders, “I just want you to—fuck, yes, yes—stay up here.”

Jackie nodded, burying her nose in Shauna’s hair and planting kisses on the crown of her head.

“Just… stay… with… me,” Shauna gasped between each word, grinding her hips down against Jackie’s hand.

“Yeah,” Jackie whispered, picking up the pace until her hand was a frantic blur between Shauna’s legs because she needed her to finish. She needed Shauna to fall apart. She needed to make her feel good right fucking now. “I’m right here, baby. I’m right here.”

Shauna whimpered, a sound even more wounded and desperate than usual.

“Jackie,” Shauna turned her head, resting her cheek against Jackie’s shoulder, her nose brushing Jackie’s neck, “tell me you love me.”

“I love you, Shauna,” Jackie said firmly. Shauna squeezed her eyes shut and nodded, whining high in her throat. Jackie tilted her head at an odd angle to kiss her sweaty temple. “I love you.”

Shauna tightened around her fingers, nodding steadily.

“I love you,” Jackie repeated. Shauna’s whole body shook. ‘I’ve always loved you, Shauna,’ Shauna’s nails dug into her skin, “I’ll never stop loving you.”

Shauna came with a strangled cry. One that shifted into real tears—quiet and calm—by the time Jackie worked her through all the waves of her orgasm. They laid together, Shauna’s face buried in Jackie’s chest and the comforter tight around them.

“That’s still a thing for you,” Jackie mused.

“What?” Shauna mumbled.

“The I love you thing,” Jackie slipped a hand under Shauna’s knee and slid her leg across her own, needing the weight of her.

“It was,” Shauna kissed her collarbone lightly. “Back then it was. But then you were… then it very much wasn’t a thing. Like… I couldn’t stand to hear it during… but now, yeah. I think it’s a thing for me again.”

“Mmm,” Jackie trailed her fingers along Shauna’s thigh. There was nothing she could say in these moments. Nothing that would erase the pain or make it better and it broke her fucking heart.

“That’s still a thing for you,” Shauna murmured sleepily, her breath warm against Jackie’s neck.

“What is?”

“The kissing,” Shauna answered with a quiet chuckle. “You kiss me like you want me to pass out.”

Jackie giggled. “I didn’t know that was a thing I did.”

(Maybe she had, just a little, but she hadn’t known that it was a thing to the degree that Shauna noticed.)

“Oh my god,” Shauna pulled back just so that Jackie could see her roll her eyes, “how could you not know? I literally used to give you split lips from trying to get some fucking air.”

“I guess you did, huh?” Jackie swiped a thumb beneath her eye, wiping away the mascara that’d run with sweat and tears. ‘God, I used to love that.’ Shauna raised a brow. “Being marked by you like that.”

“Fuck, Jackie,” Shauna inhaled sharply.

Jackie kissed her chastely and smiled.

“Well,” she held Shauna’s cheeks between her hands. “I think that’s only a thing with you.”

25. no way in hell

December 27th, 2021

Shauna woke before Jackie. She almost always did now, though she never had when they were kids. It'd always been Jackie, leaning over Shauna or brushing her finger across her nose until she blinked awake. Until the wilderness, at least, where Jackie fell into her makeshift bed like it was the only thing there to catch her.

It was early. Jackie lay facing her, one leg tangled in between both of Shauna's and one hand curled loosely against Shauna's chest. No clothes, messy makeup from the night before, hair sticking out at all angles. Looking at her like this was a fucking salve. Jackie still and warm, Shauna taking in every inch of her, without fear of looking too fucking insane as she did it.

It wasn't that Jackie seemed to care, it's just… she seemed to worry. And yeah, Jackie was jumping into things just as fast. She was just as serious. Shauna could see that. She believed it. But Jackie was… Jackie. Beautiful and kind and magnetic. She'd crawled through hell and then gone and made herself a full fucking life. Shauna had very much not, and there was always a chance that Jackie would realize that.

So, Shauna counted the freckles that dusted the bridge of her nose and measured the length of her lashes against her cheeks and watched her lips part just a centimeter with each exhale.

As if she could feel Shauna thinking too hard about her, Jackie's eyes fluttered open slowly. Shauna smiled and brushed her hair back from her face. Jackie rubbed her eye with a closed fist, inspecting it when she drew it away.

"I don't think I've skipped washing my makeup off in years," she yawned. 'And of course you,' Jackie ran her index finger across Shauna's cheek, "manage to look sexy when you sleep in yours."

Shauna chuckled. "You're always beautiful."

Jackie slipped her arms around her neck and smiled sleepily.

"Well, I don't feel anything but hungover," Jackie groaned. Shauna took her waist, pulling her in. Jackie's face found her neck, nuzzling against her.

"You're still getting over being sick," Shauna frowned. "I shouldn't have let you drink that much."

"Mmm," Jackie mumbled against Shauna's skin, "it was worth it. I think we needed that."

"Me too."

Shauna tried to roll onto her back, but Jackie held steady.

"What're you doing?"

“Rolling over?” Shauna squeezed her waist and took another false start, Jackie stubbornly on her side.

“With me?” Jackie giggled.

“Well, not if you won’t let me,” Shauna huffed exaggeratedly. “Lay on me.” She parroted Jackie, sending her own words back to her. Magic words, it seemed, because Jackie obliged, shifting with Shauna this time.

“Oh,” Shauna hissed, pain hitting her as Jackie relaxed her weight against her.

“Fuck,” Jackie gasped, trying to maneuver herself off. “Your shoulder!”

“No,” Shauna caught her, a hand between her shoulder blades to force her back down. “My shoulder doesn’t hurt. You’re fine here. Stay here. It’s just… my boobs.”

“Oh, God,” Jackie mumbled, embarrassment seeping in like it had when she’d curled in on herself the night before. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Shauna turned to bury her nose in Jackie’s hair. Sweet and citrusy and in need of a wash. Maybe she could do it, if she was lucky. “I like how it feels.”

Jackie’s lips started moving slowly against the skin beneath Shauna’s ear. Her body was pressed against Shauna’s from head to toe. This was everything Shauna had ever wanted, since she first started imaging adult things —adolescent fantasies about Jackie’s bare chest pressed against hers and Jackie’s lips drawn to her neck like a magnet and Jackie’s thigh wedged between hers. Jackie’s heart beating and her hands searching and her body relaxing. Jackie, Jackie, Jackie.

Shauna could live in this moment forever—Jackie sleepy and content in her arms. They didn’t even need to talk, they could just exist like this. Maybe she’d tilt Jackie’s chin up so that she could press their lips together.

But Shauna’s runaway brain had other plans for her mouth.

“Are you with me because you feel guilty?” she spat out quickly.

Jackie’s lips stopped moving, frozen beneath Shauna’s left ear. Shauna took a few shaky inhales. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Jackie’s elbows found purchase on the bed. She hoisted herself up to look into Shauna’s eyes, her own beautiful orbs of hazel surrounded by smudges of black makeup and dark purple circles.

“I asked Tai the same thing a few days ago,” Jackie said softly. “About you.”

“You— what?”

“I asked Taissa if she thought you loved me before I was… gone,” Jackie explained. “Or if she thought that maybe the guilt made you… confused.”

“What did she say?” Shauna asked.

“That you’ve always loved me,” Jackie pecked Shauna on the lips quickly. Shauna slid one hand lower, resting her palm against the back of Jackie’s hip. “And that we’re fucking idiots.”

“She’s right,” Shauna breathed out a laugh—relief and a tinge of embarrassment. “I loved you before I even understood what it was.”

“Me too,” Jackie promised, relaxing into Shauna again, her nose tucked against Shauna’s cheek.

Shauna couldn’t help but push for more, even if she hated herself for needing it. More reassurance, more love, more Jackie. “I don’t wanna feel like I’m… holding you back.”

“You make me so fucking happy,” Jackie’s words were honey-sweet, shining yellow and dripping with truth. “I have a lot of fucking guilt but that’s not why I wanna be with you. I’m happier than I’ve ever been, Shauna, and that’s fucking insane because everything besides you has gone to absolute hell. But I don’t care because… for the first time we’re getting it right. You and me. This feels right, doesn’t it?”

Shauna nodded. She cried. Jackie soothed.

“So I don’t care how painful it is sometimes,” Jackie murmured. “Or how much of our time we have to spend talking through the hard shit. I want this. I want you.”

“I thought that a while ago,” Shauna laughed, batting tears away quickly. “I thought… I don’t care if we spend years just fucking… crying in bed together. As long as I’m with you I just… I don’t care how difficult it is.”

“We enjoyed having mono,” Jackie slid a hand lower, gripping Shauna’s waist, “just because we were together. We’ve always been like this.”

“Do you think I’m gay?”

Shauna appeared out of nowhere—Tai had been resting her eyes, laid up in the oversized armchair next to the fire. Nat and Lottie were still tucked into bed. Nat had given up her guard dog duties, finally trusting that, between all the newly installed child locks and Van being as alert and jumpy as was humanly possible, Tai wouldn’t be able to escape the house in her sleep. Misty was off doing… Misty things and Jackie and Van were upstairs in the office, FaceTiming with Sadie.

Sadie.

Van’s daughter.

And Jackie’s, too, of course. Because everything they had seemed to be a little bit the other’s—each story Van had shared from the time between then and now connected somehow to Jackie. Tangled lives, bound up in each other, even when Jackie was halfway across the fucking country. Van and Jackie were wired sweet— kind and loving, the type of women who viewed an ocean between them as nothing, whereas Tai and Shauna had allowed the ten miles between them to release them from their duty to each other, itching to escape the love they had.

Sadie was Jackie’s because Van was Jackie’s and because no little girl wouldn’t cling to Jackie. She’d been texting Callie when Shauna failed to do so, Tai had caught her with her phone under the table. Reassuring her when Shauna couldn’t. Offering her love when Shauna

couldn't. Even Sammy would probably be able to sense that they were better, swerving straight past Tai to Jackie or Van if given the chance.

So naturally, Van and Jackie were checking in on Sadie for the millionth time that week and Shauna was cross-legged on the ottoman, sitting just as Jackie had during her and Tai's lock-down in Lottie's ridiculous master bedroom, asking if Taissa thought that she was gay.

"Good morning to you, too," Tai sighed, flashing her a small smile.

She was forever a pushover for Shauna. Looking at her like this, impossibly round eyes and an innocent expression— Bambi or Thumper flashing on the tiny TV screen in their SUV as she buckled Sammy in. A scared teenager, wrapping her arms around Taissa's waist and pulling her close.

"Sorry," Shauna shook her head like she was clearing it. "I brought you coffee."

She turned to the side table and presented Tai with one of Lottie's ornate mugs, clasped between both of her hands. She was shaking. Tai's heart dropped.

"What do you mean?" Tai asked carefully, taking the mug. "Are you asking if I think you like women? Because I sure as shit hope you're not questioning that right now. It's a little late."

Shauna almost laughed, but it caught in her throat and died.

"No. I know I like women. I've known that for a long time. I mean… do you think it's possible that I'm… fully a lesbian?"

Shauna's mouth stayed open, more words on the tip of her tongue. She'd always been skittish during matters of confession. Tai sipped her coffee to let her think.

"Like you. And Jackie and Van. And I just didn't… I just thought…"

"Shauna," Taissa set the mug down slowly. "Do you think you're a lesbian?"

"I'm asking you for a reason. I don't know—I don't—I'm overwhelmed," Shauna swallowed hard. "And it's a really fucking bad time to be having some kind of… sexuality crisis. It doesn't matter right now."

Tai almost wanted to laugh, but Shauna clearly wanted to cry and that shot pain through Taissa, physical and sharp.

"Well… if you're thinking about it right now, with everything else going on," Tai leaned a little closer, "it's probably important."

Shauna nodded, hanging on Tai's word like she was some kind of dyke fairy godmother.

Jesus fuck.

"I've never gotten the impression that you actually… like men," Tai added, trying to guide Shauna to the very fucking obvious conclusion on her own.

"Yeah, but… they're men," Shauna's nose crinkled in disgust. "I mean… does anyone?"

"Yes. Natalie does," Tai said patiently. She paused for a moment to watch Shauna think. It was better to let her draw her own conclusions, but Tai knew from experience that Shauna

was a master at letting her wheels turn until she spun out. “Nat genuinely, truly loves men the same way she loves women.”

God help her.

“I guess I thought… I don’t know, that it was just Jackie,” Shauna drew her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around her legs. “That I couldn’t… love Jeff or… anybody else because everything in me was taken up with… with Jackie.”

It fucking hurt to look at her like this. Small and curled in on herself—beautiful, broken thing that she was.

“That’s probably true to an extent,” Tai shifted in her seat, pulling a blanket across her lap. She’d felt much better after her course of stolen antibiotics, but the chills had lingered. “You definitely didn’t let yourself think about it because of Jackie.”

There was a long silence. Shauna pressed her forehead to her knees, hiding her face.

“I don’t love men.” It came out muffled, but Tai knew how to listen for Shauna’s words—blankets over her head, her face pressed to Tai’s shoulder, biting down on her own hand. Shauna twisted her chin up to blink at Tai. “Ever, really. I don’t love Jeff. All these years and he’s just sort of… there.”

Taissa was fond of Simone. She cared about her. She recognized the good in her and enjoyed spending time with her and was grateful that she was there to mother their child. But she understood what Shauna was saying in a way that she didn’t care to admit out loud, so she clenched her jaw instead.

“But sex with men can feel good,” Shauna frowned. “Like once in a while I’ll actually… y’know… finish with men. So… I thought that meant… something.”

“What are you thinking about?” Tai asked simply. “When you do?”

“I…” Shauna trailed off, a blush spreading across her cheeks.

“You don’t need to get graphic, Shauna,” Tai snorted. “Just in general. Are you looking at them? Are you thinking about the person you’re with?”

“No. But it’s usually… I know this is fucked up, but it was usually Jackie.”

“Tell me how in the fuck you think I’m surprised by that?” Tai raised her brows incredulously. “I mean, really? You think that’s what’s gonna shock me about you?”

They laughed. Light and happy and fragile, breaking into nothing with the sound of Misty clanging around in the kitchen. She was still far enough away for them to talk freely, but they quieted instinctually.

“Was it her every single time?”

“No,” Shauna chewed her lip—a practiced master of bold and shy all at once.

“So?” Tai prompted.

“Women. Yeah,” Shauna admitted quietly. She unfolded, crossing her legs beneath her again. “Am I just a fucking idiot?”

“No,” Tai brought a hand to her shoulder, squeezing gently. “You’re just super fucking broken.”

“Thanks,” Shauna rolled her eyes. The motion was playful, but they glistened with tears. “I’ve been married to a man for twenty years. And I… actively looked for sex with other men. I just don’t feel like I… get to be a lesbian after that.”

Tai sat back and kicked her feet up on the ottoman, tucking them next to Shauna’s thigh.

“Shauna, people do things they don’t really want to do all the time.”

Ripped flesh and bloodied hands and funeral pyres. Bar crawls and DUIs and reckless endangerment charges. People do bad things. They make the wrong decisions. They fuck men that they don’t want and they have children that they don’t want and they fight to survive.

“Yeah. I guess I just… tried to tell myself I loved them. I’d watch men love me and I’d think that… okay, that means I love him,” Shauna spoke like she was working through something academic. Studying for an exam. Outlining an essay. “What if I’m wrong? What if I just… can’t love the right way in general?”

“The thing is, Shauna… I’ve seen how you love. When you really do,” Tai steeled herself for the second half of her thought, watching Shauna carefully. She reassured herself that there were no signs of distance in Shauna’s eyes before she brought the hammer down. “And I don’t think you’d be capable of stabbing someone you actually love. Even if you were freaking out. Even if you were scared or disassociating or whatever the fuck.”

“I killed Jackie,” Shauna said it like she always had. A simple fact that even Taissa—career debater, decent manipulator, only person on earth that Shauna trusted for a very long time—couldn’t talk her out of.

“Shauna—”

“I mean, she’s alive,” Shauna corrected quickly. “But… not because of me. She almost died because of me.”

“That’s not the same,” Tai insisted.

“It feels worse,” Shauna countered.

“That’s because you love her.”

There was silence, other than the muted sound of Misty humming showtunes in the distance. Shauna went fully soft—pliable and waiting for more. Taissa missed this side of her. She’d hardened with age, but Jackie had melted her back down over the past few weeks. (And, Tai thought, so had she. So had Natalie and Lottie and Van and even fucking Misty.)

“You love her. I am more sure of the fact that you and Jackie are in love with each other than I am of anything else on this fucking planet,” Tai laughed. Kindness, not mockery. The ridiculous truth of all of them knowing each other’s feelings better than their own. “And you were then, too. And you got hurt and scared and yeah, you lashed out. You killed Adam because you wanted to be done with him. Your fight with Jackie was you saying dumb shit that you didn’t mean because you were a teenager. A pregnant teenager with fucking… hormones and whatever chemicals get released when you’re starving to death. It wasn’t the same.”

Taissa watched acceptance cross Shauna's features. She picked her coffee up again and took a long sip.

"I've slept with other women before," Shauna said like an admission.

Tai raised a brow. Shauna waited.

"Yes. That's not… surprising, either."

Shauna nodded. "It always hurt so bad. I was… fucking wrecked. So, I thought… okay, men are safer. Fucking men I… it hurt, too, but in a… good way. Like… that's what I was looking for. Straightforward. But with women I just…"

"Do you think it was fear? Instead of pain?" Tai asked. Shauna's eyes narrowed in consideration. "With women. I mean, there's always pain. Without Jackie you were always going to have pain but… maybe what you were feeling with the women was different because you were scared."

"Fear? I… I don't know," Shauna shook her head. "I've never really been afraid of a woman. I've been with some men that I thought might kill me and I… sort of liked that, but women aren't—"

"Jesus fucking Christ, Shauna," Tai let the reaction slip. Shauna shrugged sweetly. "That's… wow . Okay. I didn't mean fear of them. Fear that maybe you were going to let yourself… love one? That you might let yourself love someone other than Jackie?"

Shauna's face twisted in pain, tears spilling down her full cheeks. Tai set her drink aside and scooted forward in her seat, closing the distance between them.

"I think—I think that I could actually live without her," Shauna forced out through tears. "I… I haven't lived. Not really. Not since… and I don't want to. I think it would wreck me but… she's alive and okay and I know that. And I know that I… I'm not—I'm not—"

Tai dragged Shauna close, wrapping her arms around her waist. "You're not incapable of love, you're just a lesbian?"

"Yeah," Shauna let out a wet laugh, hugging Tai back. Her hands rested between Tai's shoulder blades, her chin perched on her shoulder. "I just… Jackie's so much more… she's fun and beautiful and people love her and there's a chance she'll realize that she can have someone better than me and—"

"Nope," Tai pulled back to glare at her. "Stop. You're spiraling. People do love her. She's been in plenty of relationships. She was in one like two weeks ago wasn't she?"

"Yeah, but—"

"She wants you. She loves you, God help her," Taissa cracked a grin and Shauna laughed, smacking her shoulder lightly. 'She's tried other shit and it… it didn't feel the same. It wasn't it.' It —melting into Van like no time had passed because no time had, really. None that mattered. None that counted. Not when that love had never gone away. Stupid love. Crazy love. Scary love. "Trust me on this."

Lottie mumbled in her sleep and Natalie jumped awake. It was fine—Lot was still passed out, her fingers wrapped tight around Nat's shirt. Sleeping fucking beauty—long hair braided down her back and pink satin pajamas that skimmed her curves. Natalie had always meant it when she called her princess. The tragic kind, of course. Though most of them were, weren't they? Locked in towers and silenced by men and forced into magical sleeps. (Spinning wheel, meet Seroquel).

Nat wasn't naive, she knew what Lottie was capable of. But they were all capable of the same kind of darkness and not all of them even had the excuse of Lottie's beautiful, broken brain. Jackie fucking Taylor, the last one Nat would've expected to snap into the dark shit, was still sweet as cherry pie. Except that she was a fucking killer who shot men point blank and burned their bodies to a crisp. None of them were any better or worse than Lottie.

Well… Misty and Shauna seemed to be in a constant battle for the title of worst and Taissa had beheaded her family dog recently, which was pretty next-level fucked, so maybe there was a tier system, but all-in-all, they were in this shit together.

"Natalie?" Lottie murmured, shifting. Her eyes were stuck shut. She had a hard time waking when she drugged herself to sleep. "Mmmm."

"Right here, princess," Nat untangled Lottie's fingers, replacing the cotton of her tee with her hand and squeezing tight.

"Hungry," Lottie yawned. She rolled into Nat, draping her long leg across Nat's hips and snuggling into her side. "Is it morning?"

"Yeah, Lot. It's morning."

Natalie held her, her arms cradling her upper body. It felt good. Kevyn hadn't been right. No one that hadn't been there was ever right, no matter how much she tried to force it. Misty had been a close second to Travis after Nat lost him, even though she still didn't quite understand how that crazy bitch wormed her way into her heart, but Lottie… Lottie had always been Nat's number one. Even when she was terrified of her, she loved her. Therapists would have a fucking field day with that one, acting like it should be some fucking revelation when they explained to her that she was comfortable in that feeling because her parents had been abusive sacks of shit, as if that wasn't the most obvious thing on the fucking planet. But therapists would never be able to understand Nat, because the only people left on this fucking planet who could were the six other women staying in this insane, questionably fucking magical beach house with her.

So, Nat let herself sweeten for Lottie. She kissed Lottie's face until she could pry her tired eyes open. She rubbed her back until she'd adjusted to her wakefulness and pinched her ass to make her giggle and hurried her down the stairs on their quest to talk Shauna Shipman into making them pancakes.

They were the last ones up. Lottie clung to Nat's arm just like she had when they were teens, getting to the party late because they'd been hooking up behind the rose bushes out back or in the car they'd borrowed from Lottie's dad. Lottie almost a full head taller than Natalie, hiding behind her. Shier than she looked, bright pink outfits and a hopelessly expressive face masking a nervous girl.

Everyone was still in pajamas—Shauna perched on the ottoman across from Tai's chair, Jackie and Van sitting on the floor with their backs to the fire, complaining about the chill upstairs, and Misty on the couch with her feet kicked up in front of her.

"How's Sadie?" Shauna asked. She'd been crying less than an hour ago. Nat could timestamp all the women's tears, like a coroner looking at a body and knowing the exact hour they kicked the bucket.

"Annoyed," Jackie sighed.

"Stressed," Van shrugged.

"Never thought you two would have a kid together," Nat mused, leading Lottie to the vacant sofa. "Then again, never thought you'd have dated."

Lottie flopped down, her eyes fluttering shut again and hands searching blindly for something. Nat slipped the blanket that lay over the back of the couch into them and she pulled it over herself with a small nod.

"It makes sense, though," Misty chimed in with a smile. "It's only natural that they did, proximity and all. It's like how Shauna and Taissa had a little bit of a thing!"

Holy fucking shit.

Lottie's eyes snapped open, never too tired to watch the drama unfold. She could wake from a fucking coma if the gossip was good enough. Tai's mouth hung open, so much for political grace. Shauna's eyes were saucers, taking up far too much of her face. Misty shifted. She hadn't realized she'd been dropping a goddamn bomb, Nat could see it in her eyes.

"A… a little bit…" Jackie tilted her head to the side and blinked. Hopefully Shauna could be fucking useful for once, because Nat hated watching Jackie's pretty face slip from lost puppy into kicked puppy. "Of a thing? What… what thing?"

Van was giving nothing but a steely silence. Waiting.

Nat was losing hope on the pancake front.

"We—Misty, what're you—" Shauna glared at her, equal parts confusion and anger.

"Oh no," Misty chewed her lip. "I didn't realize it was a secret. I just saw you out chopping wood and you were, y'know—"

Shauna turned back to Jackie and Van. "We kissed, once. Out there. I'm pretty sure that's what Misty is—"

"You kissed once," Jackie echoed dazedly, nodding. "Before? Or… or after I was—"

"After," Tai answered quickly. "God, after. Much after. You were gone and Van and I weren't… it was after all of that."

"We were lonely," Shauna shrugged. "It wasn't serious. We fucking sobbed right after."

"During," Tai chanced a breath that was almost a chuckle. "I'm pretty sure we cried during."

Jackie gave them a sympathetic look and Van nodded, relief exceedingly fucking evident, and they all moved into the kitchen to get on with their morning. The brief interruption faded into nothing, as Tai propped her feet on Van's lap and Jackie pressed her nose against Shauna's cheek while she flipped blueberry pancakes and Natalie kept her lips fucking sealed.

She'd seen Shauna and Taissa kissing once, too. Not out by the wood pile. Another time—the two of them curled up in the attic. But Jackie and Van didn't need to know that. Because it'd been after, too. And Nat had heard them crying long before she'd seen them tangled together.

"We have a small problem," Misty announced.

Everyone was in the living room together—their new headquarters, the equivalent of the main floor of the cabin. Everyone piled in together and attentive to each other, because there was nowhere else to put their attention. Except, like before, Shauna tended to abscond upstairs, dragging Jackie with her this time. Which was fine. Really. Because Misty and Nat went on little walks and had little chats and Misty even spent time with Lottie occasionally, even though she was messy.

But everyone was here now—Jackie perched sideways in Shauna's lap like they were at one of the few house parties Misty actually got an invite to (always at the Taylor's, always when the entire team was invited), Tai and Van next to each other, too (but more respectably so, Van's hand barely skimming Tai's shoulder), Lottie and Nat snuggled on the loveseat. Misty had been shielding them, trying to mitigate this disaster without worrying them, but it had gone too far.

"What problem?" Shauna raised a brow.

Jackie turned to look at Misty, but she massaged Shauna's shoulder to soothe her. Shauna had been so much easier to handle with Jackie there to run interference, so Misty had been setting their issues aside and simply appreciating that aspect of Jackie's presence, because everyone had been fighting with everyone else and that just seemed to be the spirit of things. No big deal. Or at least worth it, to have everyone together like this.

Besides, Misty had meant what she'd told Nat—she would never kill one of them. None of them would, even if some of them thought they might be capable. Not even Shauna and Lottie, who had come close plenty of times in their lives. Even they loved each other too much for that.

"Remember that employee that Lottie shoved down the stairwell?" Misty asked the room at large.

"Do we remember?" Van snorted. "Yeah, I think we all remember fleeing the scene of a murder last week."

Smiles and laughs, including Misty's own lips turning up a bit. Always the jokester, Van was. As long as Misty reminded herself that they were laughing at the absurdity of the situation and not Misty's delivery, it was refreshing to have something to giggle about.

“Right,” Misty nodded. “Well, turns out he was part of this collective. And the others know he’s dead. And he’d snapped a picture of Jackie, Natalie, Jeff, Shauna, and Taissa in the hallway of the hotel, which he’d already sent out by the time Lottie took care of him. It’s blurry, but it’s not really deniable.”

“Fuck,” Jackie curled inward, her body melting even closer to Shauna’s. Shauna put a hand on her waist—always so protective of each other. It was cute and a little terrifying, in a fun way, but Misty wasn’t sure that she could handle someone touching her all the time like that. Not even Natalie. “We’re so fucked.”

“How wide has it gone?” Tai asked quickly. She and Van moved in sync, sitting forward on the couch as if they may spring up at any moment. Hanging on Misty’s word. “I mean, is it anywhere else but this… this fucking forum or whatever the hell?”

“No,” Misty shook her head. “No, it’s just a handful of people who have it right now. I’ve been using my burner account and I’ve finally got them to trust me enough for things like this, but I don’t think I’m in their true inner circle yet, which is frustrating considering—”

“Lemme see, citizen detective,” Natalie appeared at Misty’s side, moving silently as ever. Once a huntress, always a huntress. She leaned over Misty’s shoulder to peer at her laptop screen. “Fucking hell, that’s us alright. What’s the move?”

Natalie was the only one who constantly wanted to be in on the source material. She liked to see what Misty was seeing. The others seemed to trust Misty in these matters, asking few questions and respecting the quality of her intel. It wasn’t that Natalie didn’t trust Misty. She just had a different way of going about things. She was the trust, but verify type. That’s part of what made her so special.

“It says here they’re meeting to discuss it,” Nat said, a frown pulling her lips down and knitting her eyebrows together. “Today, three pm, the usual place. They’ll be open, so don’t be conspicuous. It’s go time.”

“I was about to get to that,” Misty explained. “I think we need to check it out, because we’re running out of options. They’ve backed us into a bit of a corner.”

A soft cry broke the heavy silence. Lottie, her face buried in her hands. They vibrated with tremors, chipped pink polish a blur. “I—I’m—” she shook her head roughly.

Nat and Van were at her sides in seconds, ready to console her. Jackie leaned over the edge of the chair and reached for her, hand grazing her arm.

“I’m sorry,” Lottie cried.

Nat drew her in. She was good with Lottie and Lottie needed someone like that so that she didn’t spiral and get them all killed. There were no spares anymore, nowhere to channel Lottie’s crazy if things got out of hand. So, Misty had made peace with their relationship. Besides, Natalie was like Caligula. If Misty tried to clip her wings to make her stay, it would backfire and she’d leave her altogether. Misty had to be smart about it.

“I’m so fucking sorry,” Lottie sputtered. “I just freaked and now it’s all—”

“Nah,” Van said calmly. “We were already fucked, Lot. We’ve done plenty of damage the past few weeks.”

“Shauna stabbed her boyfriend,” Jackie squeezed her shoulder before leaning back into Shauna, who was pursing her lips. “And Misty killed that PI and we all killed those weird sweatsuit guys.”

“Don’t forget Tai and the dog,” Nat managed to get Lottie’s hands away from her face, leading her cheek to her chest. “Which wasn’t technically murder but really fucking feels worse.”

“Okay, you know what,” Tai rolled her eyes. “You helped Shauna chop a man into pieces and you weren’t even disassociating, so—”

“The point is,” Shauna interrupted, “we’re in this shit… together. We’ve all fucked up. It wasn’t just you, Lot.”

Jackie smiled at Shauna, looking pleasantly surprised. Lottie nodded into Nat’s t-shirt. Everyone relaxed.

“It must be Ricardo’s,” Jackie made eye contact with Misty. “Right?”

“I’m hoping so,” Misty pushed her glasses up gingerly. “I don’t see anything indicating a location, so that’s our best bet.”

“So we what?” Taissa asked. “Threaten them? Sweet talk them? Reason with them? They seem beyond fucking reason.”

“I think we play it by ear,” Nat shrugged. “They’re fucking fans of us. The hope is that these freaks get off on meeting us and we can keep them from spreading what they know. And if not… well, then we figure it out. But it’s worth a shot.”

“We make them feel special,” Shauna sighed.

“My thoughts exactly,” Misty agreed. “And… I think we need to figure out exactly what go time means.”

Van had only been to Riccardo’s a few times. Mediocre Italian food, the sort of dark lighting where it’s somehow dull even on the brightest days, shadows that feel intentional, masking the grime of a subpar closing job the night before. She’d been here with a few women from the bar. Next-day jaunts—always their idea, always coming from their place because Van wouldn’t dare bring anyone home.

She’d never bring a woman here, either. Not a one night stand. Not Jackie or Lottie. Especially not Taissa. But here they were, crowded around a sticky table that really only ought to seat six, in a back room of the restaurant that looked like a bastardized mafia movie set—heavy velvet curtains barely blocking the dusty crates stacked under a precarious set of stairs leading up to what must be the office or storage.

Van, Tai, and Natalie sat in the booth, their backs to the wall. Shauna was at the head in a chair, Jackie next to her and across from Van. Next to Jackie was a visibly anxious Lottie. Then Misty, unphased, sipping on a fruity lemonade. It’d been a shuffle, finding their seats, because all of them were drawn naturally to the spots with the best visualization.

“I feel truly fucking awful about this,” Lottie mumbled, staring down at her untouched plate of pasta. “I think this was a mistake.”

“You didn’t think that earlier,” Tai frowned. “You were all for smoking them out.”

“I know… just—” Lottie swallowed. Jackie looped an arm through her elbow and leaned into her. “I have a bad feeling, that’s all.”

Jackie caught Van’s eyes, her own widening less than a centimeter. That was all it took for Van to understand her— danger. Van agreed. Of course she did. Lottie didn’t say this shit anymore if she wasn’t… sure. But Tai didn’t buy it and Shauna gave no signs of fear and Misty and Nat were both attached to facing these fuckers head on. Van pursed her lips gently — I know.

“Well,” Shauna glanced at her phone, “it’s almost 3:30. If no one shows up soon, we’ll know this wasn’t the right place and we can go back and figure out what we wanna do.”

They’d walked by the few other patrons as the host had led them to the backroom—an elderly couple picking at their food slowly and an exhausted pair of women with three screaming kids between the two of them—but it was crystal clear that the people they’d come for weren’t there. None of the staff—two bored teens and a middle aged man—seemed to recognize them. Van hoped it would be a fucking bust. She didn’t like the idea of confronting them, no matter what bombshells they were capable of dropping. She didn’t want any of her women near these freaks.

“Jackie,” Lottie snapped toward her suddenly, gripping her arm beneath crushing fingers. Van knew that look anywhere. She’d seen something and she was fucking panicked. “You can’t be here.”

Jackie nodded patiently. “Okay, Lot. Where am I supposed to—”

“Lottie,” Shauna scooted closer to Jackie, “what’re you—”

Tai and Misty were watching Lottie with vaguely concerned interest, but Nat was craning her neck to track the door.

“Incoming, I think,” she muttered. “A few cars just parked across the street.”

“There’s a trap door,” Lottie jumped up, scurrying behind the curtain. Van fell in next to her instantly. ‘You’re not gonna like it, but you have to hide. Just a few minutes,’ Lottie’s voice was far-away and frazzled. She started pushing on a crate with both hands, trying to shift it. Van helped her, lifting it from the front. “They’re only gonna stay a few minutes, okay?”

“Hold on, you want me to go… you want me to go down the…” Jackie rose shakily at the same time as Shauna, who slipped in between Jackie and the door. Ready to protect her, even though no one but Lottie knew what they were protecting her from.

“Down?” Jackie repeated, doe-eyes glistening.

“What in the fuck are you guys—” Tai started.

“I’ll go with you,” Van took Jackie’s cheeks between her hands. Her pupils were shot and she clung to Shauna’s forearm in a vice-like grip. “It’ll end, Jack. Just a little while.”

“No one is going down into a random fucking hole in the ground,” Tai whisper-yelled, leaning forward. “Are you insane?”

Van ignored her. There was no time to unpack that shit. Lottie was dead-serious and Jackie was near panic and Shauna was an attack dog with no commands—waiting for direction, ready to pounce.

“You can’t,” Lottie shook her head so hard her curls lashed her face. “I’m sorry, Jackie. The rest of us have to stay here. I promise it’ll be okay.”

Lottie yanked on a rusty metal knob, so small that Van never would’ve seen it, raising the wooden door open slowly enough that it didn’t creak and alert the front of the restaurant to what they were doing. Van took her phone out of her pocket and flipped the flashlight on quickly, squinting down. A small space, probably just tall enough for Jackie to stand upright. No bigger than 3x5, clearly meant for storage but mostly empty.

Jackie was going to freak the absolute fuck out.

Lottie had already swept back to the table. She took Shauna’s plate and drink and placed them on the floor by her feet.

“What’re you—” Shauna started.

“Stack the chair with the others,” Lottie ordered, jerking her head toward a set of three unused chairs next to the crates. ‘And take Jackie’s seat.’ Shauna moved the chair as directed, but she didn’t sit. “Jackie, I’m sorry, honey. It’s time. Just a few minutes.”

“Definitely incoming,” Natalie said firmly. “Looks like nine, headed for the door. We’ve got like… thirty seconds.”

Lottie slid back into her seat, staring at the tangle that was Shauna, Jackie, and Van. Shauna’s hands on Jackie’s waist. Jackie shaking like a goddamn leaf. Van holding her shoulders gently.

“Jackie!” Lottie begged. “Trust me!”

“Fifteen,” Nat warned. “You want me to go stall?”

“No, we all need to be here,” Lottie patted the table in frustration. “Just… please!”

Lottie looked at Van this time, bypassing Jackie altogether. Shauna turned her attention to Van, too, pleading wordlessly for confirmation that they really needed to force Jackie into this.

Fuck.

Van nodded curtly at Shauna. They worked in tandem, offering quiet reassurances as they led Jackie to the rickety ladder down, somehow managing to push through her little whimpers of no that Van knew broke both their hearts. Van handed Jackie her phone, flashlight still on, and Shauna had just enough time to run her fingers through her hair, before they had to shut the door on her.

They took their seats, bile rising in Van’s throat and Shauna’s face pale as a sheet, just as the bell over the door rang.

It all happened so fucking fast. One second Lottie was having an ambiguous freak out and the next Shauna and Van were shutting the fucking door on Jackie.

Jackie hadn't heard what they'd said—mind blank and heart pounding in her ears louder than any voice could ever manage to cut through. All she'd known was their hands on her and their eyes wide with fear and Shauna's fingers running through her hair just once. Then nothing.

Dark.

The dust kicked up around her, making her sneeze. She stifled it, automatically sinking into being quiet. Hiding. There was a phone in her hand that she didn't remember grabbing. Its flashlight cast a pale beam across the dirty floor. She flipped the screen toward herself. Van's. She knew, because Sadie's bright smile was staring back at her. It was from her twentieth birthday, a month ago to the day. Her birthday always fell right around Thanksgiving, so they celebrated over breaks, now that she was away at school.

Sadie hadn't wanted anything big this year. It'd been just them—Van, Jackie, and Sadie's sweet girlfriend Midori, who had spent every break at Van's, even when she and Sadie were just friends, because her family was what she lightly referred to as a fucking nightmare, and Van and Jackie knew exactly what that meant. Van had taken the candid—Jackie's back to the camera, Sadie's lemon cake perched carefully in her hands with twenty perfectly placed candles glowing, because Sadie had joked that they wouldn't be able to fit the number of her age forever, so of course they'd had to prove her wrong. Sadie grinning just like she had as a little girl, her sweet round face and the tiny gap between her front teeth on display. Midori watching her, her long, dark hair tossed over her shoulder and her hands clasped together in front of her as she sang.

Jackie didn't look at the walls around her, so close they might swallow her whole. She didn't look up at the heavy trap door that was sealed overhead, barely-there cracks of light filtering in to remind her that there was a whole world up there that she couldn't fucking be in right now. She stared at the picture of Sadie and blinked back tears and listened, because there were voices she didn't recognize directly overhead.

It was muffled. Jackie couldn't be sure if she was catching everything. But she tried her fucking damndest, because if there was trouble then she sure as shit wasn't staying down here. Not this time.

Natalie, a convincingly bored drawl in her voice: "Can we help you?"

A man, probably, based on the way Jackie cringed: "Fancy seeing you here. I gotta say, I didn't expect you to…[unintelligible words, a horrible sense of dread that still managed to shine through and hit Jackie]…but happy you could make it."

Misty, eagerly: "…been keeping up with you. Would you like to join us? Maybe we can…"

A woman, not one of Jackie's: "Where's your friend?"

Van, for sure: "Look, can we cut the talking in code and get to what you want from…"

The unknown woman, angry: “We know she’s traveling with you. We’ve seen the proof. We want to talk to her…”

Shauna, over it: “If you don’t want to have a real conversation, I suggest you move the fuck on.”

The man, petulant: “You wouldn’t talk to us like that if you understood… gave her up once already, why the sudden change of heart?”

Footsteps, a new voice: “Yeah, we don’t have seating for nine, you’d have to wait until these ladies are… or shove some tables together… so it might be a while.”

Taissa, calm and steady: “We’re going to be a while. Maybe you should try another… come back later.”

A pause.

The man, aggressive: “You bitches don’t know—”

The woman, babysitting: “Darren, cool it… going to regret not letting us talk to her. Especially you—” another pause, “—you’re not going to like the alternative.”

Another man, older, tired: “You guys gotta move on, you’re creeping out… and we don’t have a table, anyway.”

Footsteps. Silence. Jackie’s women, mumbling quietly. Too quietly to really hear. Jackie held her breath.

Open it, open it, open it, open—

“We’re good,” Lottie announced, jumping up and tossing her unused cloth napkin on her chair. Shauna and Van followed, Nat still watching the street carefully.

“She’s not gonna be okay,” Van warned, catching Shauna’s wrist just before she could raise open the heavy fucking wooden door that was keeping Jackie trapped in the last place she’d ever want to be. “So… you need to be okay, yeah?”

Shauna frowned. She opened her mouth to say something sarcastic in response because of course she understood that. She brushed her hair out of her eyes, her hand grazing tears that she hadn’t realized were clinging to her cheeks, and suddenly understood why Van had given warning. She was fairly certain there hadn’t been any, just moments ago. She knew better than to cry during a direct threat like that, with those assholes sizing them up. She’d softened since having Jackie back, but she hadn’t lost her fucking mind.

“Okay,” Shauna agreed, covering Van’s hand with her own. “I’m ready.”

“She might be… well, she might not be able to be subtle, coming up,” Van scrunched her face against what Shauna suspected were tears of her own. “So we need to be ready to just… get out of here and go from there. Minimize the impact we leave on this place the best we can.”

There wasn't much minimizing they could do, what with the insanely out-of-place twenty-somethings that'd rolled into this sleepy town with a keen interest in them, but Shauna nodded regardless.

"I'll make sure nobody bothers us," Tai offered, standing and crossing the small room to the narrow doorway that led to the rest of the restaurant. She half blocked it, turned sideways and nodding convincingly, like she'd simply gotten trapped in conversation on the way to the restroom.

Lottie positioned herself off to the side, shooing Shauna directly in front of the door. "She'll want to see both of you first."

Lottie yanked it up slowly and Shauna's heart sank. Jackie was shaking, small jerking movements rolling through her entire body. She stared at the screen of Van's phone, not looking up with the sound or movement of the trapdoor, but the screen was black.

"Jackie," Shauna kneeled on the sticky floor and reached out for her. She flinched away from Shauna's hand and stared stubbornly at the blank fucking screen. "Jax, baby, it's okay. They're gone. Let's get you out of there."

Jackie nodded slowly, her face expressionless. Maybe this was what Shauna looked like, when she went away. Nothing there but the shell of her, trapped in a varnish of fear so thick that even this absent state couldn't wash it away.

Van laid a hand on Shauna's shoulder, guiding her a little to the left. "I'm gonna get her out. You catch her at the top, yeah?"

"Okay, but how—"

"Jack," Van pushed forward, ignoring Shauna, "I'm coming down."

And down she went, barely skimming the rickety ladder with her hands and feet, as if the rungs were simply interference on her drop to the ground. Shauna recentered herself, waiting for Jackie on her knees. Van took the phone gently from her hand and clicked the side, showing her the screen.

"Were you looking at Sadie?" she asked softly, brushing Jackie's hair out of her eyes. Jackie nodded again, still slightly vacant but warming up. 'Let's go call her, yeah?' Jackie didn't move. "Jack, Shauna needs you to go sit with her and Sadie wants you to call her, can you do that?"

"Yeah," Jackie whispered, but Shauna caught it. She'd spent her whole life listening for her. She could hear Jackie always, no matter how slight the sound or great the distance. "Yeah, okay."

"Come up, sweetie," Shauna motioned to her and the movement caught Jackie's eye. "Let's get out of here."

Van guided her to the ladder, supporting her hips as she climbed unsteadily. Jackie wrapped her arms around Shauna's neck as soon as she could reach, and Shauna pulled her the rest of the way out. They landed in a pile a few feet from the top of the staircase, Jackie tucked into Shauna's arms. She didn't cry. She didn't speak. She just held tight to Shauna. She used the same grip Callie had as a little girl—elbows locked around Shauna's neck and

weight fully in her arms. Jackie adorned her like a necklace, something precious and rare. When Callie had done it, her sweet little arms had been a noose, something for Shauna to choke on.

Van climbed up, and Lottie closed the door quickly. Together they pulled the crate back into place.

“I think they’re bringing the check,” Tai warned. “Can you get her up?”

Van brough the seventh chair back to the table. They shuffled seats, Shauna half-lifting Jackie into the booth so that she could hold her close and keep her grounded, the other women filling the open spaces. The server blinked at them for a moment, but Lottie handed her a wad of cash and instruction to keep the change, and she smiled, running back to the counter to count what Shauna was sure would be a generous tip.

Jackie managed to keep it together as they worked their way back to the van. Being outside seemed to bring her back into herself, the cold air whipping her hair against her cheeks. Van tucked Shauna and Jackie into the back row, Misty beside them so that she could keep watch out the back windshield. Shauna’s job, Van had insisted, was to take care of Jackie. The others would worry about the rest.

“I’m fine,” Jackie choked out.

“I know,” Shauna squeezed her closer. Her arms were wrapped around Jackie’s upper body, Jackie leaning in with her knees tucked under her. Her entire body still trembled, giving her away. “I know, Jax.”

They were after Jackie. Shauna’s worst fucking fear was a clear reality now. And she and the other women had put themselves out there, dragging Jackie into danger, because they’d underestimated these freaks. Shauna would be willing to bet anything that these internet weirdos were the same people that had done every other goddamn thing—the attack and the cover up after the fire and the flowers. All of it. There was something deeply insidious about them, beyond the stupid fucking sigil necklaces they were wearing, and Shauna had brought Jackie straight to them.

“Shauna,” Jackie muttered, “it’s okay. We’re okay. We’re—” She was borderline incoherent. Fighting through a panic attack to try and soothe Shauna’s nerves.

“You’re right,” Shauna nodded. “You’re right, baby.”

Baby. Shauna had never, ever been one for pet names. She’d felt like an imposter when she tried. Honeys and sweeties and babies sticking in her throat when it came to people she was with. But it was natural now. Baby and love tumbled out like nothing. Jackie was hers in a way no one ever had been.

“But just because you know it’s gonna be okay,” Shauna whispered against her cheek, “doesn’t mean it doesn’t suck. You’re allowed to be upset. You can let it out.”

Jackie’s breath caught. She sank lower, burying her face in Shauna’s chest, and bawled.

“We need Midori,” Jackie insisted. “She can hack them or whatever the fuck it is she does and figure out exactly what they’re threatening.”

Her eyes were swollen and her hair was pulled back off her face with a claw clip, too short now to throw into a bun on top of her head like she usually would. Shauna had taken her to the bathroom when they got back to the house and they’d stayed in there for a good twenty minutes while Nat and Van had checked the perimeter and Misty had hopped back on her fucking Reddit boards. Lottie and Van had made it clear to Shauna that she needed to try and get Jackie to cry it out. The panic always came eventually, even if she could stave it off at first. When she bottled it up, it often hit at inopportune times and, if Lottie’s hunches were correct, they were about to have some very inopportune fucking times.

Shauna had managed both to convince Jackie to release the pain and to comfort her through it. Good. Jackie needed to be on her game right now.

“Jack, we would have to tell them so fucking much,” Van shook her head. “No. There’s gotta be another way. Misty, can’t you—”

“She’s a hacker?” Misty closed her laptop partway, giving Jackie her full attention. “Do you trust her?”

“Yes and yes,” Jackie confirmed. Shauna’s hand was in both of hers, her fingers drawing little stars and circles on the back of it just like she had when they were teens. She was gearing up to give a pep talk if she had to. “And Van, I don’t think we have another option. I think they need to know, anyway. It’s safer for them to be aware of things, right now.”

“Jackie’s right,” Lottie chimed in, fixing Van with a look that told her how serious she was. “They need to know.”

Tai watched Van carefully, her hand resting on her thigh. Van chewed her lip and squeezed her eyes shut. Lottie felt Natalie’s eyes on her. She could tell that Nat was worried, unsure whether she should be taking commands from Lottie or shoving pills down her throat.

“Fine,” Van nodded once—curt and pained. “But nobody look anxious. If you’re gonna freak out go in the other room, yeah? She doesn’t need extra reasons to flip.”

They used Misty’s laptop to video call the girls, Van texting ahead of time to tell Sadie to pick up. The women gathered around the little screen, set up in the middle of the coffee table—Jackie, Van, and Lottie on the couch, Shauna and Taissa sitting on the ground against their legs, and Misty and Natalie leaning over the back of the couch.

Van and Jackie did most of the explaining—catching them up to speed, omitting anything related to homicide. Sadie was mostly stunned, her sweet face pinched with fear and betrayal, but Midori kicked into gear immediately.

She knew the basics of who they were—the crash and the press and even who Jackie was, because she was a good kid and a perceptive kid and there was no pulling one over on her. She would’ve figured it out, just like Sadie had when she was thirteen, calling the three of them to the dining room one afternoon to confront them about their pasts. It’d been a difficult call to make, but thank God they had, because otherwise the shock might’ve been too much for her to set to work the way she did.

“Okay, uh… Misty, right?” Midori asked, her eyes locked on the screen of her laptop, perched on a pillow in her lap.

“Yes,” Misty chimed excitedly.

“I got your list of usernames to check out, any standouts or do you want me to cast a wide net?”

Misty looked at her stack of notes, flipping to the second page. “This originalsoccergirl seems to be sort of… spearheading things, for lack of a better word.”

The women all went their own version of wide-eyed, Lottie included, certainly all willing Misty to shut the fuck up, because why on earth would she say that right now?

“Original soccer girl?” Tai scoffed, breaking the awkward silence. “Jesus.”

“These people are fucking freaks,” Nat grumbled.

“They are,” Midori nodded. She was focused. Completely in her element as she tapped away, Sadie peering over her shoulder anxiously. “So… okay, her name is Willow Caldwell. Given name was Cara. She changed it in… 2017. Sound familiar to any of you?”

Everyone mumbled a quick no or shook their head.

“Who changes their name to Willow?” Lottie mused.

“Maybe she just really hated the alliteration,” Nat rested her hand on Lottie’s shoulders, rubbing her thumb back and forth soothingly.

“Here’s a picture. Might be a bit old, but,” Midori flipped her screen around, holding it up to the camera—brunette, wide smile, crazy fucking eyes. “Anyone recognize her?”

Another round of nos. Midori brought her computer back to her lap.

“Twenty-six years old. Originally from…” Midori squinted at her screen. “Washington state. Currently living in… New Jersey, of course she is.”

Sadie stood, her baby pink sweater obscuring the camera for a moment, before sitting down and handing Midori her glasses.

“How do you do this?” Taissa asked, her head tilted to the side. “Find all this?”

“She’s so smart it’s insane,” Sadie gushed before Midori could answer. It was hard to tell who exactly they were looking at, the way the screen was set up, but Lottie had noticed Sadie’s careful gaze had been cast down for much of the time, probably trained on Tai and Shauna. Assessing them. “She’s studying computer science, which I don’t get at all. Top of her class.”

“It’s really not that hard,” Midori chuckled. ‘You just grew up with… your internet-hesitant trio of lesbian caregivers.’ Sadie laughed, her button-nose scrunching up and her freckles bunching together. “Which I’m totally jealous of, by the way,” Midori looked up at the screen for emphasis before turning back to Sadie, “but… you lack some, uh, common knowledge, Sades.”

“This feels like a… little more than common knowledge,” Shauna said, her voice deceivingly gentle and sweet, just like always. Jackie absently brushed a hand through her hair.

“Okay, yeah,” Midori admitted with a half-shrug. “I’ve learned a few… extra things, but a woman never reveals her secrets.”

“Especially when they’re federal crimes,” Sadie added with a grin.

“Especially when they’re federal crimes. So, Willow—she grew up really rich. Shit, like so rich. She’s from Bainbridge Island.”

“Where’s that?” Van asked.

“Just some millionaire island outside of Seattle,” Midori supplied. She was from somewhere in Oregon, Lottie could never remember the city. “Rich families, but lots of weirdo, antivax, fake new age spiritualism that’s somehow always racist.”

“Sounds about right,” Nat sighed.

Midori typed quickly, chewing on her lower lip. “Okay, she doesn’t work currently. At least, nothing above board.”

“So, plenty of time for stalking,” Sadie made a sour face, a subtler version of the literal sour face she’d made as a little girl, when she insisted on biting into the lemon wedge Lottie had popped in her water.

“Exactly. Did three and a half years of a degree in… forensic psychology, with a focus in… victimology. A little on the nose there, Willow,” Midori paused, tapping directly on her screen. “Oh, wow. You guys were actually her thesis.”

“Why’d she quit?” Misty leaned forward again, as if the answer would be written on the screen for her somehow.

“Looks like… two misdemeanors,” Midori answered quickly. “One trespassing charge and one breaking and entering three days later—damn, quick turnaround—followed by a brief hospitalization for… spiritual psychosis. Sorry, Lot.”

Lottie giggled in surprise. Most of the other women joined her, a small chuckle or an amused snort. Midori was never one to shy away from reality or avoid hard topics. She was sensitive but realistic. Really the only personality type that made sense for a girl as complicated as Sadie.

“I mean,” Lottie shrugged. “It makes sense.”

“Where was she trespassing?” Misty chimed in. “Do you know?”

“Some place called Willow Brook Ranch and a residential address in… Eden Falls, New Hampshire?”

“Travis!” Nat jumped behind Lottie, her fingers twitching. “That’s fucking Travis. That’s where he was… that’s where—” Her voice was thick. Lottie reached up to cover her hand with her own, squeezing tight.

“It is,” Misty sounded stunned, but it felt more related to someone other than her finding all of this information so quickly than the actual content of Midori’s words.

“This bitch probably fucking killed him,” Nat murmured quietly. Lottie squeezed again.

“Travis Martinez, yeah?” Midori clarified.

“Yes,” Nat sniffed back tears roughly. Angry with herself for having emotions. Lottie wanted to drag her close, but she couldn’t just yet. She might not be able to for a long while, because it seemed like things were about to get very fucking messy.

“He got killed?” Sadie’s baby blues were saucer-wide. “Wasn’t he… with you out there?”

“Yeah, birdy,” Van nodded just once. “He was.”

“Looks like the charges didn’t go anywhere because she’s a trust fund kid, obviously,” Midori rolled her eyes, “but… also because it seems likeTravis didn’t give the cops anything to work with. Calls were made by two witnesses. He refused to give a statement.”

“So that’s it?” Jackie shook her head, her hair swaying side to side. Shauna reached back for her hand and Sadie’s eyes flicked down briefly—always so perceptive. She’d spent so many of her early years having to be and, as every single woman in this room knew, there was no undoing that conditioning. “She goes after Travis once, like, five years ago and nothing since and suddenly she’s back?”

“Well, not nothing. Just not criminal record earning activities,” Midori clarified. “Looks like she got smarter. Got out of inpatient treatment and changed her name. Worked odd jobs here and there, but mostly lived off of her parent’s money. Started frequenting the forums about you guys more. She’s written blog posts and… oh, a pretty scathing review of Skin in the Game.”

“She’s not wrong on that one,” Tai mumbled.

“She said it… left out the genius of the spiritual design. Weird shit,” Midori pursed her lips. “I’ll send this stuff to your email, Misty.”

“Great,” Misty pulled her phone out of her pocket and started tapping the screen.

“She’s been a Jackie Taylor is alive truther since pretty much day one,” Midori said apologetically. “Claims she saw her in a coffee shop in Montreal and would recognize her anywhere.”

“I mean, she probably did see me,” Jackie sighed. “I’d have no way of knowing.”

“Says she hired a PI to track Jackie down in 2018 and he… um, he ended up dead. Gunshot wound to the head and some major arson. Case is still unsolved,” Midori finally looked up from her screen, raising an eyebrow.

Jackie shrugged. Sadie’s sweet lips parted slightly as she frowned. Shock. She was going to be in shock for a while. Lottie’s heart broke for her.

“Anyway, that’s her,” Midori moved on when she realized that they wouldn’t be providing any explanation. “Whoa, um… okay, so I’m in her messages and… it looks like this group is

planning a ritual of some kind? Claiming it's modeled off of ones that… you guys did out there, but, uh, it doesn't seem very… low-key, dancing naked under the moon or whatever."

"Holy shit," Sadie gasped. "No it… really doesn't."

Everyone stiffened. Van's knee bounced so hard Taissa put a hand behind her to hold it steady. Jackie shifted uncomfortably. Lottie held her breath.

"What does it say?" Jackie said calmly.

"So… it says that… Shauna?" Midori cleared her throat. "Did you keep journals out there?"

"I… yeah," Shauna squeezed her hands into fists on her lap. "I did."

"Okay, well… it says that they got them somehow. Then they ended up selling them to help fund this ritual, beyond what Willow could front," Midori explained, eyes flicking back and forth quickly to skim her screen. "And it's sort of… vague, which feels intentional… but it's sort of looking like they plan to… actually hurt someone."

"Hurt how?" Van asked quickly.

"Who?" Shauna said at the same time.

"Oh my God," Sadie's sweet face flushed. "It's like… like blood sacrifice and… they're talking about a pyre? Mom, what the hell is this?"

"I don't know," Van shook her head. Her tone was convincing, even if the evidence was damning. "They're talking crazy, sweetie. Just… tell us what else they said."

"This seems pretty legit, you guys," Midori spoke before Sadie could. "I sent all of it over to you, but… I think you should take these people seriously. They're well-funded and… really obsessed."

They're obsessed. Just obsessed.

Taissa in her sick bed, drenched in sea-water, mumbling warnings.

Fuck.

"Did they say who?" Lottie frowned. "For the… sacrifice?"

"They said… the one who was supposed to die out there will appease it the most," Sadie's lower lip trembled. She reached for Midori's hand and Midori took it quickly, staring at her with unmasked concern for the first time since this whole interaction began. "Emmy…is that you? I mean, that must be, right?"

"I don't know, honey," Jackie said softly. "But it's okay. I'm fine. I'm right here."

"I really don't like this," Sadie's eyes welled with tears. "Please, just… can't you come home already?"

"It's okay, sweetheart," Jackie soothed. "Nothing bad is gonna happen, okay? They're just some creeps we'll deal with and move on from."

“We’re fine, sweetie,” Van echoed, voice calm and unwavering. “Everything is okay, but we can’t come home just yet. We’re gonna figure out what’s up with this woman and then we’ll be home, yeah?”

“But—” Sadie practically whimpered. Lottie didn’t offer her assurances, didn’t know how to without being disingenuous.

“How many are there?” Nat cut in. “Who seem to be in this… deep shit with the crazy lady?”

“Ballpark? Like fifty,” Midori swallowed hard. “Oh fuck,” she muttered under her breath, eyes bouncing even quicker beneath her silver frames.

“What?” at least four of them asked at once.

“She just got a new message,” Midori muttered. Sadie’s hand shook as she raised it to cover her mouth. “It’s… we couldn’t get her, but the daughter will appease it. She’s en route. Do any of you have a daughter?”

“Oh my God,” Tai gasped, scrambling to her feet just as quickly as Shauna, who was using Jackie’s knees to pull herself up.

There was chaos—Van trying to calm Sadie and Midori, Jackie and Taissa pulling Shauna out of frame, Shauna trembling as she pulled her phone out, Nat and Misty watching her with terrified expressions.

Lottie stood slowly, positioning herself halfway between Van, Nat, and Misty, still around the couch, and Jackie, Tai, and Shauna, a few feet from it.

“Pick up, pick up, pick up,” Shauna chanted under her breath. “She’s not fucking picking up!”

“Where are they headed?” Van asked Sadie and Midori as gently as she could, trying to keep them calm. “Does it say?”

“Nothing specific,” Midori shook her head, “no.”

“Goddamn it!” Shauna yelled.

Tai held her up from behind, hands on her waist to keep her steady. Shauna didn’t even seem to notice that Tai was touching her or that her knees were locked and her legs were shaking.

Jackie whipped her phone out. “I’ll keep calling Callie, you try Jeff.” Shauna didn’t move. ‘Shauna!’ Jackie took one of Shauna’s cheeks in her hand and guided her pale face to her own. “Call Jeff. Call Jeff, baby.”

Shauna nodded dazedly.

“Do you think they’re going to…” Natalie trailed off.

“There’s no way they’re taking a kidnapped girl on a fucking plane,” Van said, low enough that Shauna couldn’t overhear, “and they’re not driving across the country with one either.”

“They know we won’t call the fucking cops,” Nat whispered, “they have too much on us.”

“Still, it’s too risky,” Van shook her head. “We don’t even know if this is legitimate yet, let’s just—”

“Jeff!” Shauna yelped into her phone. Everyone froze. “Where’s Callie? Is she home?”

A brief pause.

“Are you looking at her?” Shauna screamed. “Go check her fucking room right now! Go!”

Another pause.

“Fuck!” Shauna kicked the glass side table hard. Hard enough for it to shatter, the metal frame toppling sideways to the ground. “You fucking useless piece of shit! One job! You had one fucking job!”

“So… of course Maine has the highest fucking forest percentage of any state, its practically their motto,” Midori’s knee shook up and down as she pressed on through the screaming. Sadie held her forearm firmly. “But… it’s got to be somewhere in the North Woods.”

“How big are they?” Nat clenched her hands into fists, her nails digging in. “The woods?”

Midori hesitated for a second, chewing on the answer. “10.5 million acres.”

“Uninhabited?” Misty asked calmly.

“Mostly,” Midori rubbed her forehead briefly, brushing dark hair out of her eyes.

“Of course they are,” Lottie grimaced, her stomach flipping.

“Do you have gas in the car?” Van picked at her cuticles, blood already pooling around her thumb. “Sadie?”

“A… a full tank,” Sadie nodded slowly. “You always say to have a full tank, so… so I do. I can… drive and Midori can keep looking.”

Shauna’s voice went higher in pitch. Jackie and Taissa hushed her. Lottie couldn’t fucking watch anymore.

It would be okay. Callie would be okay.

But this was going to hurt like a bitch.

“Good. Five minutes to pack, then get in the car and come straight to The Manor,” Van instructed. “It’s the best place for you right now. They know about the bar, so they probably know about the house. No stops. I’ll have Charlie meet you here—Lot, can you text her?”

“Of course,” Lottie started typing immediately. Charlie had started out as an occasional one night stand for Lottie—a local who made her living doing odd jobs and gardening—but over the years she’d shifted into a friend of theirs. She managed their garden while they were away and she knew… things about them. She was soft and sweet and honest. And she, like every other person with any sense, loved the crap out of Sadie. Charlie also trusted very few people and was tougher than hell—a woman after their own hearts.

Dangerous situation. Sadie and Midori headed to the house, can you meet them here and stay for a while? Come in an hour? Bring Gracie?

Gracie, her German Shepherd, who barked like a menace when she heard so much as an unknown footstep, loved Sadie almost as much as she loved Charlie. Lottie's phone pinged immediately.

You got it.

"Doors locked, windows locked, no one else comes in," Van insisted. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes, but—"

"Birdy, I need you to do this okay? Everything is gonna be okay. I promise. But I've got to go for now," Van was holding it together, but the skin on her hands was suffering for it. Lottie sat next to her, covering them with her own gently. "If you see anything weird, any cars that might be following you, what do you do?"

"Random turns, stay on busy roads, call you," Sadie sniffled, wiping her nose.

"Yes. Everything's alright, I'll call soon."

"Charlie will beat you here," Lottie tried to keep her voice measured. "But you call her when you're outside to make sure everything is good."

Sadie nodded, tears streaming down her cheeks. Midori had already started packing their things—Lottie could see her flitting in and out of frame.

"I love you," Van said, finger hovering over the touchpad to end the call. "It's gonna be okay."

"Love you," Sadie choked out.

Van hung up, breaths shaky and irregular, and turned to the other women. Lottie, Nat, and Misty did the same.

As Taissa and Jackie calmed Shauna down—ending the call with Jeff, telling him to stay the fuck put until they gave further instruction— and pulled her away from the shards of glass surrounding her, Lottie was sure of one thing. If Jeff Sadecki had been in the room with them for that conversation, he would be dead on the fucking floor.

"Holy shit, princess," Nat whistled. "That's… a lot of fucking guns."

They'd come to a consensus on a plan quickly—no fucking cops, Jeff father of the fucking year, only parent worse than Shauna Sadecki on standby. Gather supplies, drive toward the fucking woods, figure out the details later. The supplies in question involved weapons, what with fifty-ish murderous fucking freaks waiting for them, and apparently Lottie was even more of an enigma than Natalie had thought, because behind her fancy fucking bookwall in her fancy fucking office which she never fucking used was a secret room. A republican's wet dream of a room. A goddamn prepper room.

"What, would you rather use sharpened sticks again?" Lottie raised a brow and crossed her arms.

Nat snorted and shook her head. The room was long and narrow, just barely fitting all the women as they trailed in behind Natalie, mouths hanging open in shock. Automatic lights clicked on in sections as they moved. James Bond rich person shit. One wall was completely covered in mounted weapons—handguns and rifles, mostly, but a few stray machetes in sheaths. The other held shelf after shelf of camp food—the ultra lightweight, dehydrated stuff that longhaul backpackers use—and bottled water. A pile of backpacks, maybe a dozen or so, were in crates below the food. On the shorter walls were all the odds and ends—first aid kits, matches, lighters, ammo. Everything. Literally everything that Natalie had planned on insisting they make a stop for before they fucked off into the fucking Appalachians.

"What the fuck, Lottie?" Tai was clearly stunned. Her hand left Shauna's back to cover her mouth. "I mean, really, what the fuck?"

"It's always what the fuck, Lottie," Lottie mimicked Tai's horrified stance and tone halfheartedly, "and never thank you for saving my life, Lottie."

"Thank you, Lottie," Nat said earnestly, her face splitting into a grin, unable to maintain the solemnity of Shauna's fucking kid is missing and we're going to go back into the woods they'd been upholding. "Goddamn."

Nat and Misty started packing immediately, splitting rations of food and water between packs, while the rest of the women remained frozen in place.

"I don't really like making my own weapons," Lottie shrugged, lifting a glock off of its mount, "I prefer store bought."

"I brought my kid here, Lot," Van sputtered. "Like… so many times."

"And did you ever realize this was here?" Lottie asked, securing a holster around her waist, the black leather standing out against her lilac cigarette pants.

"No, but—"

"Then neither did she."

"Jack?" Van stared at her, floundering. Nat started on the ammo. "What—did you know—"

"No," Jackie was holding Shauna's arm like a leash, tethering her to herself. She turned to Lottie, craning her neck around her to peer down the wall. "Do you have a 17?"

"Of course," Lottie passed one over. Jackie tested its weight and gave a quick affirmative nod.

"Fucking hell," Van muttered, lifting a rifle off the wall and check the length of the strap.

Jackie helped Shauna find a small handgun, asking her quietly if she knew how to handle it. Shauna was a zombie, but she wasn't gone. Her anger was just about the only thing grounding her in reality. Anger could do a lot for Shauna Shipman, Nat had seen that firsthand. And that anger sent her straight toward one of the machetes, like a moth to a fucking flame, because Shauna wouldn't be Shauna if she didn't have a thing for sharp objects.

“Lottie…” Misty looked up from her spot on the ground, a propane tank in each hand. “Were you… expecting something like this?”

“You know I was a girl scout,” Lottie pursed her lips. “Always be prepared, or whatever.”

“Lottie,” Shauna said firmly, the first word she’d uttered to anyone but Jackie since the phone call with Jeff.

“I’m not saying shit,” Lottie doubled down. “You’ll throw me in the fucking looney bin.”

“What’s up, Charlie?” Van answered her cell on the first ring.

Nat was driving and Van was riding shotgun, checking maps and fielding texts and calls from Sadie and Midori. (Not to mention both back seat driving and back seat hacking from Misty, who kept leaning forward over Van’s shoulder, as if Van couldn’t hear her perfectly fine from her seat directly behind her.) The best guess Midori had was an unnamed lake that was at least visible on a topographic map of the state, because it didn’t seem like these fucking assholes were forging thorugh completely unmarked territory. It was remote, but not extreme—around a ten mile hike in from the nearest service road, but nowhere near any marked trails. The issue was that it was a guess and guesses felt very fucking insufficient with Shauna’s kid being hauled off by a goddamn cult that thought the things they’d done out there were something to emulate.

This was the first call from Charlie, though, and that shot so much fear through Van it started to dent her adrenaline-fueled focus. Her heart pounded and her throat felt full.

“Don’t panic,” Charlie started reassuringly. “Nothing’s wrong.” Van relaxed just a bit, her shoulders dropping an inch.

“What’s she saying?” Jackie called from the back, her arm wrapped firmly around Shauna, who was seated between her and Taissa.

Jackie—and Shauna, when she could manage to send anything other than frantic curses his way—had been on the phone with Jeff every few minutes. They’d managed—with almost concerning ease—to convince him that cops were not a fucking option and set him with the task of checking in with all of Callie’s friends, even though they all knew it would be a dead fucking end.

Van held a hand up—gentle acknowledgement, rather than impatience. She and Jackie knew each other’s movements down to the minutia. Jackie nodded.

“They’re not coming here,” Charlie said calmly. Gracie whined in the background, her tail thudding against the ground loud enough for Van to catch it. “Sadie tried to text and call it off. Said you were stressed and not to bother you about it. Figured that was her doing and not yours?”

“Fuck,” Van muttered.

Lottie and Jackie both pitched forward. “Sadie told Charlie they weren’t coming,” Van explained quickly. ‘That was absolutely her doing,’ Van said into the receiver. “Would you mind staying put for a while? I’ll give them a call.”

“You got it,” Charlie agreed, as easily as always. “You guys good?”

“As good as we can be,” Van answered. “Thanks, Charlie.”

Sadie, to her small credit, also picked up on the first ring.

“Hi, Mom,” she said, her voice as sweet as could be. Up to something— cutting her own hair when she was seven and hiding the golden locks under the giant teddy bear Lottie had gotten for her, forging Van’s signature on a permission slip when she was twelve, sneaking out her window in the middle of the night when she was sixteen. “What’s… up?”

“Oh, you know,” Van sighed, “on the road. Dealing with some really rough stuff.”

“Uh-huh,” Sadie mumbled cautiously when Van paused.

“So imagine,” Van used her mom voice, the one it’d taken her years to perfect, because even firmness had felt unfairly disciplinarian to her, “how much worse the already really rough stuff got when I realized that my daughter isn’t doing what she’s supposed to be doing right now.”

“Damn, how did you—”

“Midori!” Sadie cut her off sharply.

“She already knows, Sades,” Midori said defensively.

“Charlie called,” Van explained. “Where the hell are you?”

“Speaker phone!” Jackie demanded desperately from the backseat. Everyone in the car fell silent. Van clicked it on.

“Mimi!” Jackie said sternly.

Mimi, the nickname Jackie had given her when she was little—a play on her middle name that only Jackie was allowed to use, because Sadie had thought that if she called Jackie a special, secret name, it was only right that Jackie did the same for her.

“I… well… we…”

“You tell us where you are right now,” Jackie’s voice was laced with terror. It kicked Sadie into gear.

“Okay, don’t get mad, because I’m grown and… so… technically, you can’t actually force me to do anything—”

Van, Lottie, and Jackie all interrupted at exactly the same time.

“Sadie Marie.”

“Oh, she’s grown now.”

“You have got to be kidding!”

“And!” Sadie raised her voice. “And I’m not gonna just sit around and do nothing when I could be useful. We’re heading to the woods—”

“No! Goddamn it, birdy, please,” Van begged. “This isn’t—”

“Not the service roads!” Sadie said. “Nothing insane.”

“Every part of this is insane!” Jackie snapped.

“Look,” Midori said cautiously, “she’s deadset. I don’t think anything is gonna change her mind. But I found a pretty well-frequented trail entrance. There’s a parking lot. We’ll set up there and have a full tank in case we need to leave suddenly.”

“Totally deadset,” Sadie echoed. “And we’ll be safe. I learned from the best.”

When Sadie made up her mind, there was no changing it. Van’s sweet, stubborn, fearless child was going to give her a fucking heart attack.

“Okay,” Jackie said into the phone. “I’m sending the address as soon as we hang up.”

They were at a rest stop at Lottie’s insistence. Not quite the middle of nowhere, cars whizzing by on the interstate, but not quite populated, no vehicles parked in the small lot besides their own . Lottie had been texting Jackie as they drove, ever since Misty had brought their options to her attention. It’d been hard for Jackie to covertly respond with Shauna attached to her hip, but she’d managed. The three of them were like little girls, passing notes under everyone else’s nose, except the notes weren’t scraps of lined paper and gel pen. They were frantic texts with endless typos, because Jackie usually preferred sending voice memos and Lottie didn’t have her reading glasses. Misty’s were concise—mostly screenshots, telling them everything they needed to know to make their decision.

“Pass me the phone real quick,” Van motioned for it. Jackie did. “Jeff? This is Van. I know we didn’t know each other very well when we were kids, but I gotta tell you, I don’t have the highest faith in your abilities.”

There was a brief pause, in which Jeff probably said something bumbling that only strengthened Van’s convictions. He was going to meet Sadie and Midori at the trailhead. The three of them could wait together. It wasn’t a bad idea to have people on the outside, they’d reasoned, in case they got split up and pushed out in that direction, instead of whatever backroad they parked their van on.

(They wouldn’t need the three of them until it was all over, really. Lottie was fairly certain of that. Callie, though, would need somewhere to head when the cult let her go.)

“I’m going in to make sure nothing happens to your kid, so you don’t let anything happen to mine, do you understand me? Those girls are your priority. If something’s off, you drive the fuck away with them, yeah?”

It was time. Van was on the phone, grilling Jeff. Shauna, Taissa, and Nat had gone to the bathroom—Jackie’s call with Jeff had been strategic timing, forcing Shauna to release her iron grip briefly. Lottie nodded once in Misty’s direction and Misty nodded back with a small grin, her curls bobbing around her shoulders.

“I can’t wait,” Lottie sighed, “I’ve gotta fucking pee.”

“Hold on,” Van covered the receiver and looked their direction. “Give me just a—”

“I’ve gotta go, too,” Jackie said swiftly. “You two are good here, yeah? It isn’t far.”

Van and Misty agreed. Lottie and Jackie walked toward the small shack that held the bathroom stalls, veering straight into the wooded area behind it when they heard the first shot.

“Misty!” Van screamed, flinching away. “Jeff, I gotta go, just—no, it’s fine, just— fuck.”

Van ended the call, shoving the phone in her pocket.

“Misty, what the fuck?” she demanded again, peering into the trees that Misty stood facing, the opposite direction of the bathroom. “Did you see something? Fucking speak!”

Misty held her handgun straight in front of her with both hands, just like she’d learned in her Safe Shooters Self-Defense class. “I saw one of them! He was wearing the sigil!”

She’d always wanted to be an actress. She’d thought it would suit her, since she spent so much of her time thinking about what to say and how to say it already. She must’ve been pulling it off now—her very important part in the master plan— because Van already had her rifle out of the trunk.

“Just one?” Van asked. “Armed?”

“I don’t—” Misty started, the rest of her sentence falling on deaf ears, because frenzied voices were moving closer to them.

“Hey!”

“What the hell is—”

“—heard shots!”

Misty swiveled her head just long enough to see that everything was going perfectly according to plan. Not bad for a dozen rushed texts, half of them borderline unintelligible. Shauna, Nat, and Taissa were sprinting towards them, poor Natalie still buckling her belt. Jackie and Lottie were nowhere to be found.

Misty spun back around and pulled the trigger again, firing off into dead space.

“Oops,” Misty shrugged, pushing her glasses up on her nose. “Must’ve been a false alarm!”

Must’ve been a false alarm said the fucking cunt who’d fired off six rounds and scared the shit out of all of them. Fucking bullshit. Misty was up to something.

Van clicked her safety on and scrubbed both hands over her face, letting it hang over her shoulder by the strap.

“Where’s Jackie?” Shauna mumbled, her words so quiet Taissa almost missed them. Her eyes were huge, searching as she spun frantically. “Where—where—”

She was right—they stood in a tight circle near the van, but Lottie and Jackie weren't with them.

"They were going to the bathroom…" Van looked nearly as stunned as Shauna. Her feet started moving, picking up speed with every step, as she headed toward the tiny structure. "Didn't you—weren't they with you?"

"No," Nat had grabbed her gun somewhere in the middle of it all. She fell in next to Van, Taissa and Shauna close behind. "No, we would've noticed. It's tiny and they would've fucking run toward the sound of—"

"Jack!" Van screamed. "Lottie!"

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"No," Shauna whimpered. She pulled ahead, still the fastest among them. "No, no, no, no, no."

Shauna yanked open the bathroom door but, before she could disappear inside of it, Lottie emerged like a goddamn ghost from behind one of the massive Fir trees behind it. They all flocked to her. Except… except Misty, who was taking her sweet time crossing the parking lot.

"Where's Jackie?" Shauna got to Lottie first, taking her roughly by the shoulders. Lottie swayed on her feet like a rag doll. "Lottie! Where is she? What happened?"

"She's alive," Lottie said calmly. "But she had to go."

Shouts from most of the women flooded Tai's ears, but she couldn't even open her fucking mouth. Nat pried Shauna's hands off of Lottie quickly.

"Go?" Shauna screeched. "Go where?"

"No," Van shook her head. 'No, she wouldn't— Jackie!' Van moved closer to the tree line. "Jackie!"

"They didn't want Callie. They wanted Jackie," Misty had finally wandered over to them. "So, they messaged me proposing a trade and the three of us decided—"

"A trade?" Shauna screamed. "You decided— you—you fucking cunt, I'll fucking kill—"

Natalie took Shauna by surprise, locking her arms behind her back and holding tight as she thrashed. Taissa caught Van around the waist, digging her nails into her sides. Van's breathing was ragged and her eyes were glassy, but she kept herself under control.

"She can't be far!" Nat yelled to be heard over the chaos, her voice cracking. "Lot, Misty —fucking tell me everything right now."

"She's gone. I didn't see the car, they wouldn't let me," Lottie explained, in a tone Tai knew all too well. Her endlessly frustrating earth goddess prophet act. "We're going to find her and she's going to be okay. But it won't be until we're out there, so we really ought to get moving."

"So, you what, Lot?" Nat was so clearly pained, disappointment coloring her features. "You had a—a vision or whatever, and you thought that was enough to send her off with

them?"

Lottie clicked her tongue and looked away.

Fucking fuck.

"It was Jackie's decision, whether or not to take Callie's place," Misty shrugged. "And she made it."

Tai had been thinking about it since she'd found out that Jackie was alive. She had a feeling that she'd managed to keep Shauna alive the first time because, somewhere deep down, Shauna had known that Jackie was still there. She'd said it. Screamed it. Cried it. And Tai had shushed her. But she'd been right. She'd known the entire time, on some level, that Jackie was still alive.

Shauna yelped like a wounded animal. It knocked the wind out of Taissa. She whipped toward her.

Shauna's legs gave out. Nat helped guide her down and she sank to her knees on the gravel. Everyone went to her, even Lottie and Misty, though they hung back out of punching range, just in case. This was too much for one woman. Callie had been a huge hit, but Shauna had held it together.

Taissa had been grateful, earlier, that they hadn't gotten their preferred target—that Jackie was safe and they'd settled for Callie instead—because Taissa was selfish. She cared far more about Shauna, fucking murderous bitch that she was, than her innocent daughter. And Tai had a feeling that all the women knew what she knew. As fucked as it was, Shauna could survive her own daughter's death. But there was no way in hell she could survive Jackie's.

Taissa knew that they would get Jackie back, but her certainty didn't come from some bullshit vision. She didn't have faith in sacrifice or gods or meaning that Lottie divined from the sounds in the forest that Tai pretended she couldn't hear.

Taissa had faith in herself.

And Shauna was screaming that scream, the one that sounded like blood bubbling up from her throat, and Van was shouting, and Van never shouted, and Taissa refused to spend the rest of her life keeping them tethered to this earth, miserable and imprisoned, because Jackie wasn't on it.

So, Taissa Turner was going to bring Jackie Taylor home, just to give her a piece of her fucking mind.

Jackie was afraid, yeah, but she wasn't nearly as scared as she should be. Maybe that was trauma or adrenaline or pure determination, but it felt like more than that. Jackie felt just as certain as Lottie had seemed that they were all walking out of this forest alive. Well, not the cult motherfuckers, obviously. They were about to get their asses handed to them. But the rest of them.

Somehow, after all the years of passive observance— pain and struggle and luck that couldn't exactly be called dumb— Jackie had fallen into this place without ever consciously

accepting it.

But in the back of a dirty, rundown sedan that smelled like stress and sweat, with a blindfold wrapped tight around her eyes and her wrists bound with what felt like homemade rope, Jackie finally realized that she believed in Lottie fucking Matthews and women's intuition and the permanence of nature and every other hippie-ass value associated with it far more than she'd ever believed in her parents' God.

Besides, even if she was wrong, there was no way in hell that Jackie was going to let Shauna's daughter die in her place.

26. jackie goddamn taylor

Spring 1994

"So… we'll stay at mine tonight, right?" Shauna asked.

The seat in front of them was peeling away, revealing the sickly, yellowing foam beneath it. Jackie forced her eyes off of the torn scrap of shitty fake leather they'd been fixed on to blink at Shauna. (Duct tape. That was all it would take to fix it—a strip of shiny gray and no one would have to look at the mess beneath it, but no one had bothered to patch it up. Maybe Jackie could bring some the next time they—)

"Jax?" Shauna waved a hand in front of her face. Her nail polish was chipped. Dark, amber red that they'd plucked from beneath her mom's sink. Jackie's toes matched.

"Yeah," Jackie answered. "Your place."

The bus driver turned too sharply. Jackie relaxed her weight automatically, letting herself slide into Shauna until she was pressed all the way against the window. They both did it. They had since they were little girls—a sudden refusal to tense their muscles against the momentum. When they were kids, it was giggles and hands batting at each other. But now… now it was something else entirely. Jackie's thigh slid against Shauna's and her hand landed in her lap and, when they turned to look at each other, their faces were far too close.

"It was just one game," Shauna offered quietly. Her hair was messy, half out of its ponytail. Her cheeks were still a little pink and her lips stayed half-open after she spoke. Jackie forced herself to refocus on her dark eyes. Most of the older girls were kicking themselves, unwilling to hear any silver linings bullshit. Half of them had fallen asleep. Shauna's comfort was only meant for Jackie. She took it greedily. "We'll bounce back."

Jackie smiled her prettiest smile and shrugged off her letterman. "You're so right, Shipman." She laid the jacket over their laps and held her breath as she searched for Shauna's hand beneath it. Shauna let her take it, squeezing. "I'm just… not excited to tell my mom, y'know?"

It was true. Jackie didn't want to see the look on her mom's face when she told her that she was a loser. That not only had the team lost, Jackie hadn't scored a single goal. Hadn't even assisted in one. Because, no. Her mom wasn't interested in soccer. She thought it was silly and boyish that Jackie even played it as a young woman. Skinned knees and grass stains were not things to be proud of, in her very loud opinion. But she was interested in Jackie's faults. So she'd ask, in great fucking detail, how Jackie had contributed to their loss.

That's not why Jackie had said it, though. She'd said it because the second the words left her mouth, Shauna started running her thumb back and forth across her hand slowly, just as Jackie had hoped she might. It was all back and forth, this thing they had. Jackie had grabbed Shauna's hand first—the setup. Shauna had engaged in the play, even if it took a little prompting from Jackie. So now, Jackie could do what she'd been aching to do since they shuffled onto the bus.

The other girls did it—a head in a lap or against a shoulder to support their necks while they dozed. It was easy for them. There was no thought behind it or dance around it. They sat, they stretched out, they touched each other. But Jackie was different. It wasn't casual to her. As she dropped her head to the side, her jaw against Shauna's shoulder and her cheek against the crook of Shauna's neck, she felt it in her whole body. Butterflies in her stomach and her heart thudding in her chest, like she was getting away with something.

Because Jackie knew that the other girls didn't do what she did.

(She tried not to. She tried to be normal. Most of the time.)

But Jackie was tired and she'd always been a bit of a sore loser and Shauna was still playing with her hand like Jeff always tried to at the movie theater, Jackie jerking away and pretending that she just really wanted popcorn suddenly.

So, as Shauna knocked her head against Jackie's and rested it there, Jackie allowed herself to do the thing that she really, honestly tried not to do very often. She closed her eyes and inhaled deep and pretended that she was Shauna's girlfriend instead of Jeff's. She pretended that they kissed sober, that it wasn't just something fun to do when they were drunk, that it meant something to Shauna. Jackie pretended that Shauna wanted her the same way she wanted Shauna.

Shauna's breathing evened out. She pulled Jackie's hand even further into her lap as she got comfortable, nestling it so that Jackie could feel her thighs on either side of it.

Losing one game wasn't really the worst thing in the world.

Spring 1996

Jackie Taylor was wandering around like a kicked puppy again.

She still had blood streaked across her face from the crash and she kept holding her elbows in front of her body, like she was trying to fold in on herself. Shauna was giving her the cold shoulder, an impulse that Taissa completely understood. Really, she did. Especially right now, with Van sitting close enough that their thighs brushed and making excuses to touch her hair and her face every few minutes.

But Tai had overheard Jackie, agonizing to Mari of all people, and even though most of Tai's brain screamed Van most of the time, overriding her senses and lulling her into a mingle-minded stupor, she still had access to some nagging logic. She still had empathy for the fucking homecoming queen, running around without her other half in this forested version of hell where they'd landed.

Because Jackie had truly believed that there was no saving Van.

Was that wrong? Yeah. A stupid call? Definitely.

Did Taissa, at her most base instinctual level, want to shake Jackie and scream at her and make her understand that Van fucking Palmer was the most important person on this entire fucking planet? Very much so.

But Jackie had told Mari, her voice genuinely choked, that she'd truly believed she was choosing between saving Shauna or watching them both die.

Tai wasn't a perfect person. She wasn't going to be Jackie's discount therapist and relieve her of her guilt, because Jackie had left her fucking girlfriend on that plane, thinking she was going to blow up. But Jackie was stupid when it came to Shauna. And Taissa understood that. She'd stepped over one of the sophomores as she took what was probably her dying fucking breath, because all she could think about was finding Van. She would've done anything, sacrificed anyone to save Van. (Which was objectively fucking terrifying, and a thing she really wished she hadn't had to learn about herself like this, but she'd sort through that later.)

And, honestly? Who the fuck was Shauna Shipman to be angry on their behalf? This wasn't even about Van to her. It was about Jackie. Nothing Shauna did was ever about anyone but Jackie, and it was fucking maddening that Taissa had to stare at the reddish-brown stain that clung to Jackie's forehead, all because Shauna was using her Van as a pawn in her freaky friendship mindgames.

Tai couldn't do it anymore.

"I'll be right back," she told Van. She squeezed her thigh as she stood—a safer spot than she wanted to, close to her knee—and Van raised a brow, but let her go without comment, scooting a little closer to Lottie and Laura Lee.

Tai wet a tee-shirt with Sea Breeze before she approached Jackie. She didn't want to drag this out. A sneak attack—a mom walking over with her thumb already licked to smudge away a spot of makeup, no time for protests. Taissa knew her limits. She could do this for Jackie, but she couldn't listen to her whine.

"Taylor!" she called, catching her forearm.

Jackie stopped pacing, a deer-in-headlights expression painting her face. She looked like the lead in a horror movie—pretty features, terrified eyes, blood and ash laid out in a way that almost looked intentional.

"What—"

"You've got some blood on your face. Might be a cut," Tai held the tee-shirt up to let Jackie register it for a split second, before gently patting at her skin.

Jackie winced, but didn't try to pull away. Tai wiped at her face in silence until it was clean. There was a cut underneath the blood, but it was small. It would heal on its own.

"There," Tai nodded. "Better."

"I—" Jackie swallowed and restarted. "Thanks, Tai."

"No problem."

Jackie would keep up the kicked puppy act until Shauna dropped the broody bitch act—Tai was sure of it. But at least she wouldn't have the remnants of the worst fucking day of their lives pressed into her skin.

Spring 1995

"Cold," Jackie mumbled, lifting her head off of the pillow to squint at Shauna. "Hurry up. Please."

Shauna stood near her desk, chugging out of a half-empty Gatorade bottle. It was early evening, the sun just starting to set. They'd slept most of the day, but Jackie was still bone tired and the only thing that made her feel any better right now was wrapping her entire body around Shauna's. They were sick and miserable—mono was no fucking joke—but Jackie didn't mind it all that much. Deb had convinced her parents that she should stay at theirs, holed up with Shauna under her nursing care. (They hadn't taken much convincing. Jackie's mom had been sick of looking at her after the first weekend, pale and sickly and unkempt.) So, Jackie didn't have to deal with her parents and she had the perfect excuse to be snuggled up with Shauna nearly 24/7.

"Just a second," Shauna took a break from gulping down the blue liquid, wiping her chin and catching her breath. "My mom's working tonight, she's gonna come check if we've had enough to drink before she leaves."

Jackie groaned, pulling the comforter tighter around her shoulders and shivering.

"You should really have some, Jax," Shauna crossed the room and perched herself on the edge of the bed, holding the bottle in front of Jackie's face. There were only a few inches left. Not a huge ask, but Jackie's throat was so sore that every sip might as well be swallowing a sword.

"No," Jackie pouted, tears pricking her eyes.

She wanted Shauna to lay the fuck down. That was all. Just put that shit away and slide under the covers and rest her head against Jackie's chest, like she had been before she saw the time on her radio and jumped out of bed. Jackie knew she was being pathetic, but she didn't much care. Not when she felt this shitty.

"Come on," Shauna rubbed her shoulder gently. "Just a few sips and then—"

"Girls?" Deb's voice came from behind her closed door, followed by three quick knocks.

She never, ever came in unannounced. Jackie had said that to her mom once, after she'd barrelled in on them changing into their pajamas. Shauna's mom always knocks. She'd had hell to pay for that one, lectures on disrespect and whose house it really was, followed by intense questioning—why would she knock when you're over there, what could you girls possibly be up to that she wouldn't want to see?

"Yeah, Mom," Shauna answered. "Come in."

"Can you get the door, hon? My hands are full."

Shauna opened it. Deb was in her scrubs already, her hair pulled back off her face and her reading glasses perched on top of her head so that she wouldn't forget them. There was a laundry basket on her hip and a tray in her hand. Shauna took it, setting it on the ground. Water, tea, crackers, and soup—steam billowing up.

"Okay, up, sweetie," Deb directed Jackie. She had kind eyes, the exact same shade of brown as Shauna's. Just looking at her made Jackie feel a little bit better. Deb took a few

more Gatorades out of the basket and set them on the desk. “Just for a minute. I’m gonna change these sheets and you need to get some fluids in.”

Jackie shuffled over to Shauna, mirroring her position. They sat cross legged on the floor, the tray between them. Normally, Jackie would’ve offered to help, but she knew Deb would just wave her off. Shauna sipped on her tea slowly.

Deb stayed until she was satisfied with their progress, half the soup and a few crackers gone. She dropped painkillers into their hands and watched them swallow.

“Good.” She tossed the empty bottles on top of the dirty sheets in the basket. “You can get back in bed, but try and drink some more and finish those crackers tonight or you’ll feel even worse.”

She popped the basket back on her hip, giving each of them a one armed hug as they stood, and told them she’d wake them when she got home in the morning for more meds and a quick walk around the house to get their lungs working.

Jackie shuffled to the bathroom after Deb left. She squinted at herself in the mirror as she washed her hands. She should wash her face, really. Maybe pull her hair back. She looked a fucking mess. But her arms were so sore and brushing her teeth was asking enough of herself. Shauna wouldn’t care.

Really, she wouldn’t. She probably wouldn’t think any differently of Jackie if she never wore makeup or fixed her hair, which was nearly impossible to believe sometimes, but Jackie had years of experience to back it up when doubt crept in.

(What Jackie didn’t like to think about was the natural conclusion to that thought. Shauna didn’t care, because Shauna didn’t want her like that.)

When Jackie made it back to Shauna’s room, she was sitting up with a hairbrush in her hand.

“Come sit,” Shauna ordered, patting the bed between her legs. ‘I can braid your hair.’ Jackie opened her mouth to protest. “It’s gonna get matted,” Shauna said sternly, “and then it’ll hurt like a bitch to undo. You know it will. Two minutes, and then we can go back to bed.”

Jackie normally loved it when Shauna did her hair. (She’d claimed that she didn’t know how to braid her own hair when they were little, just so that she could feel Shauna’s fingers against her scalp. That was before she knew why she wanted Shauna to touch her so much, of course. And that ship had sailed when they got old enough for Shauna to realize that there was no way in hell Jackie’s mother was doing the braids she wore to school.) But Jackie had come into this room with a plan, damnit. Lay down, coax Shauna half on top of her, scratch her back until they fell asleep. It was a good plan. It’s just that Shauna wasn’t having it. She waved a hair tie impatiently and motioned Jackie toward her with a jerk of her chin.

“Okay,” Jackie croaked. Her voice was nearly gone. They’d had varying symptoms—Jackie’s throat and body were killing her, Shauna had a splitting headache and swollen lymph nodes. Both feverish, both fatigued, both desperate to curl up in each other and fucking sleep.

She sat and Shauna worked quickly, sectioning her hair.

“Two?” Jackie whined. “Can’t you just—”

“If I do one, it’s gonna bug you when you lay on your back,” Shauna interrupted, already halfway through the first dutch braid. “And I don’t wanna redo it later.”

She was right. Of course she was—Shauna was usually right when it came to Jackie, Jackie was usually right when it came to Shauna. They worked that way. A perfect match.

Shauna finished, tugging on one braid twice to signal that she was done. She waited for Jackie to get settled on her back before laying down. Jackie hadn’t been sure how the hell she was going to spin it, if Shauna didn’t automatically resume the position they’d been in before the series of interruptions.

(Okay, Shipman, I need you to put your cheek on my chest and your hand on my ribs and your leg over mine, so that I can get positively fucking high on the smell of your hair and stick my hand under your shirt to scratch your back and think about the way our thighs are sticking together, sound good?)

Jackie didn’t have to ask, thankfully. They fell into it immediately. Shauna even snuck her own hand under Jackie’s tank top, to rub her thumb back and forth against her bare skin. Comfort—that’s what people wanted when they were sick. This was comfortable. Shauna just wanted to be soothed, because she felt like shit.

Jackie shouldn’t be thinking about the way her miserably sick best friend’s body was pressed against her own. She shouldn’t be remembering the last time they kissed, drunk and desperate, as she ran her nails in tiny circles between Shauna’s shoulder blades. She really shouldn’t be thinking about the way Shauna’s lips were parted against the top of her breast, because her nose was stuffed up and she had to breathe through her mouth. None of those things should be making Jackie feel elated like this.

“You okay, Jax?” Shauna mumbled sleepily.

“Yeah,” Jackie nodded, her chin nudging the top of Shauna’s head. “Are you?”

“Mhmm,” Shauna yawned. “Comfy.”

“Me too,” Jackie whispered.

And God, was she.

Winter 1996

“Listen, Taylor,” Nat chuckled as Jackie pulled the closet doors shut behind them, “I know you don’t wanna do this, so we can just cut the act and chill until time is up.”

Natalie almost hadn’t come to this party in the first place. Hanging out in some future frat bro’s basement wasn’t exactly her idea of a good time, but Van had all but begged and Lottie had pouted her rosebud lips and batted her long lashes until Nat caved. And now she was in a coat closet, drunk as all hell, the smell of stale cigs and Jackie’s citrusy perfume suffocating her, because they’d gotten talked into a drinking game that landed her seven minutes in heaven with little miss perfect.

Shauna had been borderline apoplectic as Jackie hauled Nat off, her manicured nails digging into her wrist. Shauna had always been a little dykey when it came to Jackie, but Jackie didn't seem to notice. She just laughed and pulled Nat along. For show, of course. Couldn't let the guys think she wasn't game. Lottie, for her part, had watched Natalie with quiet interest, her cheeks flushed sort of like they did when Nat—

"Do you not want to?" Jackie raised a brow and tilted her head to the side.

The dull light that filtered in through the shuttered doors made it hard to get a clear read on her expression, but she sounded… genuinely curious. She hadn't jumped at the out like Natalie had expected her to. Nat's heart sped up a little. She felt off kilter. She needed a fucking smoke.

"I, uh, I mean—" Nat sputtered. "Fuck, Jackie, are you serious?"

Jackie stepped closer. She put her hands on either side of Nat's face, her palms cupping her cheeks and her fingers against her scalp. Jackie's skin was a little cold. Nat shivered.

"It's a game," Jackie shrugged. She was close enough now that Nat could see the smile pulling at her glossy lips. Her eyes flicked down to Natalie's mouth and she leaned in until their noses were nearly touching. "But… if you don't want to—"

There must've been more vodka in that jungle juice than Natalie had thought, because she was making out with Jackie fucking Taylor.

She'd thought, yeah. Maybe Jackie would peck her on the lips. Maybe she'd even fake a noise or two for the curious eavesdroppers, give them a show and giggle about it later. But Nat had never considered that Jackie would press her entire body against her own and shove her tongue down her throat and moan like she meant it.

Nat caught her around the waist and started pushing back. She turned them around to get some control—Jackie against the wall, a heavy winter coat hanging just behind Natalie's back. Jackie'd warmed up quickly—her hands moved hot against Nat's skin, sliding down her neck and up beneath her shirt to hold her ribcage. Nat let her body take over, because fuck if Jackie wasn't actually a damn good kisser and she was way too drunk to stop and think this through. Her hand slid down to Jackie's thigh and Jackie lifted her leg to wrap it around her waist.

Fucking hell.

Nat's lips stopped moving for a split second in her shock. Jackie took advantage, working her way down Nat's jaw to the side of her throat. Nat groaned, choking it off when she realized she was making a noise loud enough that everyone on the other side of the doors might hear. She'd never be able to live down preppy princess Jackie Taylor making her moan. She pulled Jackie away gently with a hand fisted in her honey-brown hair. They made eye contact for a long moment—Jackie panting, pink smeared around her mouth, a sheen of sweat across her neck and chest, her pupils blown.

"Fuck," Nat muttered under her breath. She jerked forward, zeroing in on the skin beneath Jackie's ear. Jackie whimpered and arched her back. Nat slid her hand higher, from Jackie's thigh to her ass, slightly terrified of the potential outburst, but too into it to stop herself.

Jackie didn't push her away. It wasn't some magic line, forged in backward Jackie logic, that Nat had crossed. Jackie didn't scream dyke and barrel back into the party.

Jackie moaned and bucked her hips and slid her own hand up to cup Nat's breast over her bra.

What the absolute fuck?

The kitchen timer went off. Shauna yanked the doors open the second it chimed, like she'd been loitering outside the whole time. She didn't see them tangled together, a series of coats obscuring her view. Jackie released Nat quickly, wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, and gave her an innocent peck on the cheek, like the ones she sometimes gave them after winning games.

The irony of the situation wasn't lost on Nat, as she watched Shauna pull Jackie out of a literal closet by the elbow at the exact moment she realized that those dykey looks went both ways.

Jackie goddamn Taylor was a fucking lesbian.

Natalie needed to find Lottie.

Winter 1996 (that very same night)

"Slow down," Jackie whined. Shauna was tugging her arm so hard she thought her shoulder might seriously be sore in the morning. She was too drunk to hurry through the house like this, dodging bodies and the beer pong table and the shitty plastic-covered couches. "Where are we going?"

Shauna had been a massive fucking bitch all night. She hadn't wanted anything to do with Jackie until she'd gone into that closet with Nat. It'd been a two part decision of Jackie's, to let herself really kiss Nat.

Jackie had never kissed another girl before. Not really. Not with tongue like that. No one but Shauna, and she was just drunk enough to let herself be curious. It was good. Nat was a good kisser and grabby and confident in a way that made Jackie go further than she'd intended.

But the other reason, the more important one, was that she needed Shauna to pay attention to her. She didn't care if it was anger or jealousy— Jackie needed something from her. The broody bitch, cold shoulder bullshit was making her crazy. So it felt unbelievably fucking good to have Shauna's fingers digging into her elbow as she dragged her along. Maybe that was sick, but Jackie couldn't fucking help it. She'd take whatever Shauna would give her.

"Bathroom," Shauna choked out through gritted teeth.

Jackie's heart thudded in her chest. This was going to end in screaming or kissing, and either way she didn't care because it meant that Shauna was worked up about her and that was the entire goal. Even before the stupid game, that had been Jackie's goal. Make herself look perfect and drape herself across Shauna and at least get a few laughs out of her. But

Shauna had soured almost immediately, running off to spend most of the night with Van and Nat, and Jackie had no idea why.

They wandered upstairs. They weren't supposed to be up there, but no one was going to come look for them. Everyone was way too plastered to notice their absence. Shauna found the bathroom and tugged Jackie inside. Her chest heaved with shaky breaths. Her cheeks were a pretty, angry pink. She locked the door behind them.

Jackie stood in the center of the bathroom, watching as Shauna blinked at her. She didn't move, she didn't speak, she just stared.

"Shipman?" Jackie asked. "What are we doing here?"

Shauna moved like lightning. She all but growled in frustration, sinking her fingers into Jackie's waist and pulling her closer. Jackie squeaked against her lips, surprised by the sudden aggression, but Shauna just twisted one hand through her hair to hold her head in place.

Shauna bit her lip hard. Jackie opened her mouth to let her tongue in. She ran it everywhere frantically, almost like she was trying to go over every spot Natalie might've touched. Jackie's pulse thudded between her legs.

Shauna pushed her backwards until her ass hit the sink. Then she kept pushing, her hands on Jackie's waist, until Jackie had to arch her back and catch her weight with a hand behind her. Shauna went straight for her chest, chin hitting her cleavage and lips working beneath her collarbone. This was nowhere near their typical. This was… ravenous. Angry. Intense.

Hot as fucking hell.

"Shauna," Jackie whimpered.

She tried to run her free hand through Shauna's hair, but Shauna grabbed it, shoving it back against her side. She'd never acted like this. Jackie couldn't tell if she'd done something brilliant or insane, couldn't tell whether this would be good in the long run, but fuck did it feel good in the moment.

"Did you have fun?" Shauna pulled back just enough to ask, moving her lips to Jackie's neck right after the words left her mouth.

"Wh—what?" Jackie stammered.

"With Nat," Shauna spat. "Did you have fun?"

"I—I—" There was no right answer. Jackie reached for Shauna's hair again. She didn't react this time, just sucked harder on the skin at the base of Jackie's neck. Jackie moaned, tossing her head back. "You're gonna g-give me hickeys, Shauna. Be— fuck— be careful."

Shauna stopped completely. She tore her lips away and made heavy eye contact, panting for breath. "You can just tell people Natalie gave them to you."

"Shauna," Jackie frowned, "it was just a fucking game. Why… why are you so pissed?"

Jackie just needed her to say why. Needed it to be the reason she wanted it to be. Needed Shauna to tell her that she wanted her, because it was really starting to seem like she did, but Jackie couldn't be sure. Shauna was a jealous friend, she always had been. Both of them had

been—tense when other girls got too close, scared that they would lose each other—so Jackie just needed to know if it was about something more than that.

"I'm not pissed," Shauna said quietly, shaking her head. Her eyes were dark, her hair a mess, her chest flushed.

"I… okay, it's just that you really seem—"

Jackie couldn't finish the thought, not that she had any idea where to take it, anyway. Shauna kissed her again, sliding her hands down to her ass. Jackie knew what Shauna wanted. She put her weight back in her hands and let Shauna lift her onto the counter. Shauna dug her fingers into Jackie's hips and Jackie wrapped her legs around Shauna's waist and let her lead the kiss, meeting her intensity the best she could.

Shauna broke the kiss. Jackie immediately latched onto her throat, holding her close with arms wrapped tight around her neck. She wasn't fucking ready for this to end.

Shauna whimpered. Jackie scraped with her teeth.

"Did she touch you?"

Jackie froze, her lips still against Shauna's neck, her nose tucked beneath her ear. "What?"

Shauna took a deep breath. She slid her hand across Jackie's leg, beneath the skirt of her dress, which had ridden up too far to cover much of anything. She paused at the highest possible point of her inner thigh. Jackie drew in a sharp breath and clung to her. Her head was fucking spinning. Shauna could probably feel the heat coming off of her. They'd only gone this far once, after Jackie had pulled Shauna down on top of her in bed and they'd tried to do what they normally did and the bed had squeaked, so Shauna had—

"Did she touch you, Jax?" Shauna was eerily calm and level. Her frenzied energy was gone. Her speech was a little slurred and her breath smelled of booze, but she seemed in control of herself in a way that Jackie hadn't expected and definitely didn't think she could match.

"No," Jackie breathed. "Not—just my ass. Grabbed my ass a little, nothing serious."

Shauna nodded. Jackie felt her cheek slide against her own. Her fingers crept slowly, brushing the side of Jackie's underwear. Jackie moaned just for that. Jeff could slam his fingers in and out and swirl his tongue around and Jackie felt nothing. Discomfort sometimes, but never anything positive. Shauna just barely ghosted her fingers over the very edge of her underwear, and Jackie felt insane.

She couldn't speak. She bobbed her chin up and down as hard as she could and bucked her hips and Shauna got the message, finding just the right spot immediately. Shauna let Jackie kiss her for most of it, circling her fingers against her clit and holding steady when Jackie ground her hips down against her hand. But when Jackie's thighs started to quiver, Shauna slid her free hand under her jaw and pulled her away gently to force eye contact.

"Fuck," Jackie gasped. "Fuck, I'm— God, Shauna."

Every muscle in her body was tingling. Her skin was on fire. She felt the knot in her abdomen grow tight, tight, tighter. Shauna pulled her kiss-swollen lip between her teeth and watched Jackie intently.

“I’m gonna—I’m gonna—” Jackie whimpered.

Shauna nodded, sweeping her thumb along the line of Jackie’s jaw. “Good,” she mumbled.

Jackie’s whole body went rigid. She tried to toss her head back, but Shauna held her in place.

“Uh-uh,” she said. “Look at me.”

Jackie dug her fingers into Shauna’s shoulders hard, because she felt like she might float right off the counter if she didn’t hold onto something.

She felt herself clench down and that first little wave washed over her and—

“Jackie!” Jeff bellowed. “Shauna!”

Jackie gasped. She gripped Shauna’s wrist, but she was so fucking close that the pleasure didn’t stop coming. Her clit didn’t stop twitching. And Shauna didn’t stop moving. She acted like nothing was happening outside the door.

“Shauna—” Jackie whispered, trying to fight off the orgasm, even though it was too fucking late for that.

“You guys up here?” Jeff called, his voice slightly closer to the door.

“No,” Shauna whispered back. She pressed harder, circled faster. Jackie’s entire body shook. “Finish for me.”

Jackie had never come like this before. Her mind went blank. She forgot everything. Not just their surroundings, not just that Jeff was probably right outside the door at this point. She wasn’t sure she could’ve recalled her own fucking middle name. The only thing she could remember was Shauna. Shauna, Shauna, Shauna.

Shauna’s, whose eyes went wide— equal parts terror and excitement—and whose free hand clamped down over Jackie’s mouth.

That’s how Jackie realized that she was crying out, far too fucking loud. But pleasure was rolling through her in fucking waves and Shauna was looking at her like she was committing this moment to memory and, for once in her fucking life, Jackie truly couldn’t force herself to care about the consequences.

Winter 1996 (still that very same night)

Jackie and Shauna were officially acting weird. Even fucking weirder than normal, which was saying a lot. They’d come out of the bathroom together after a few attempts at calling for them. That wasn’t weird on its own—more girls did that than not, it practically seemed like a cardinal girl sin to make your friend take a piss alone. Except they’d been gone a while. Jeff had hoped to catch Jackie after she came out of that coat closet with Nat fucking Scatorccio, because the guys found it hot (and so did he), but they might be confused about her not trotting back to her boyfriend afterwards.

But Shauna had gotten to Jackie first. She always did.

So now they were driving away from Michael's house in dead silence, Jackie shotgun and Shauna in the back. Jackie kept tugging her dress down to cover her thighs. Jeff tried to touch her knee, but she crossed her legs and leaned away from him. She was covered in red splotches—bruises forming on her neck and her chest, in places that Jeff rarely even got to brush with his lips, let alone leave a mark. Shauna had her cheek pressed against the window and her eyes shut, that way she did when she was totally fucking faded.

"So… Shauna's first?" Jeff asked. Shauna didn't speak. She just let her body sway as he took a turn. He wanted Jackie. Maybe making out with Nat had gotten her warmed up. Maybe she'd let him—

"No," Jackie shook her head and crossed her arms, tugging her jacket tight around her body and covering the little cleavage she had. "Just go to mine."

Jeff sighed. Shauna seemed too fucking out of it to want anything to do with him after they dropped Jackie off. Besides, Shauna had been in a fucking bitchy mood most of the night. The whole night, really, right up until the end. She'd been a little sweeter as Jeff had watched the two girls move through the house to collect all their shit—coats and purses and shoes just strewn about—letting Jackie cling to her arm.

"Fine," he mumbled.

"Y'know, Jeff," Shauna snapped, without opening her eyes, "you don't have to fucking drive us to this shit if you don't want to. I'm perfectly capable of—"

"You're perfectly capable of getting drunk off your ass and crashing into a goddamn tree," Jeff muttered under his breath.

"Asshole," Shauna spat halfheartedly.

"Guys," Jackie whined. "Babe, I think what Shauna meant was that it's kind of shitty when you offer to take us and then act like it's some big… hassle. That's all."

"I meant he's a fucking asshole," Shauna whispered just loud enough for them to hear her.

She was one to talk. He never understood it—why Shauna was so comfortable treating him like shit so much of the time, when one word from him could ruin her and Jackie forever. He'd asked once, but she'd said something about mutually assured destruction and got scary fucking mad, so he never brought it up again.

"I didn't say it was a fucking hassle," Jeff shook his head. "It's just a few stops—"

"One stop," Jackie corrected him. "Just mine. Shauna's staying the night."

"I am?" Shauna asked, finally peeling her eyes open.

"She is?" Jeff asked at the same time. "But your parents are gonna—"

"They're not home," Jackie shrugged. "Not until Sunday night." She flipped down the visor and started wiping at practically invisible spots of makeup under her eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me, Jackie?" Jeff gaped at her. He lowered his voice, eyeing Shauna in the rearview. "You said that the next time you had the house to yourself, we'd… y'know…"

Fuck.

She'd said she would finally let him fuck her. All the way. After goddamn years of waiting. But of course it'd been bullshit. Of course she'd hidden it and decided to bring Shauna over, instead.

"I planned this weekend with Shauna ages ago," Jackie pursed her lips and stared at Shauna in the warped mirror. "So, no. I don't really have the house to myself."

Fucking lying.

They were at the Taylor's. Jeff slowed to a stop in front of the driveway.

"Yep," Shauna clicked off her seatbelt and bent forward to slap a hand against the back of his seat. "Sorry, Sadecki."

"Shauna," he scoffed, "you just fucking said that you didn't know you were gonna—"

"Forgot," she batted her lashes innocently. Jackie was already halfway out the door, not even bothering to kiss him goodnight. Shauna pushed hers open and slid out, calling over her shoulder in a forced, sing-song voice. "Probably because I got drunk off my ass!"

Two doors slammed at once. Jackie and Shauna held hands as they stumbled up the drive. He watched them the whole way. Shauna hugged Jackie from behind while she struggled to unlock the front door. Jackie nearly tripped on the front step.

They shut the door behind them, Shauna flipping him off at the last second, and Jeff drove home. Alone.

Fall 1998

It was absolutely insane, how easy it was.

Jackie had been given the perfect opportunity. Van had heard through the grapevine that Jackie's cousin was getting married (Van and Nat still talked sometimes, Nat and Tai still talked sometimes, and that was as far as Jackie let her mind wander down that particular chain of telephone, because she couldn't hardly say her fucking name without crying).

So, Jackie had used Ralph—because if he couldn't do it himself, he always had someone who could—to plan. He'd figured out when the wedding was and that it was in Hawaii (of course Robin had to have a destination wedding and thank God she did). He'd taken a rough sketch and description from Jackie of the opal ring her grandmother—the only person in her shitty fucking family who had actually, truly loved her—had given her just before she died. Jackie paid to have a passable costume jewelry dupe made.

All Jackie took on the plane was that fake ring, one change of clothes, just in case, and her wallet. Van wouldn't fly and Jackie didn't want to drive across the country twice just for this. It was simple—LAX to EWR, cab to a random house six blocks away from her childhood home, find the hide-a-key just where it had always been, let herself in.

The hard part was how fucking creepy it was. Untouched, mostly. They hadn't boxed any of her shit up. But it was immaculately clean, meaning they were making a housekeeper come

into this creepy-ass shrine to a dead girl and dust all her trinkets.

Jackie doubted either of her parents actually spent any time in there, mourning or missing her. As far as she knew, her dad had never stepped foot in her bedroom in her life. And her mom… well. Jackie didn't think she was crying into her pillow at night. This was for show.

She shook it off. Her flight back was only a few hours away. Van hated sleeping in their apartment alone and she hated that Jackie even got on planes to begin with, so Jackie had planned for a quick turnaround.

Replace the ring, take any other small things that stood out, sit on her hands on the ride back to the airport and bite down on her tongue and refuse to let herself tell the driver to drop her at the nearest payphone, because that would mean calling 411 and asking for Shauna Shipman's phone number, and maybe even asking for Jeffery Sadecki's because they lived together and everything might be under his name and Jackie wanted nothing more than to sob into the phone and hear her voice and beg for her address.

But Jackie had a plan and Jackie had self-control, so she was going to stick to it.

She almost did. But on her way out she grabbed two books that Shauna had given her—her parents wouldn't notice their absence, because Jackie had hidden them in the back of her closet anyway—and a tape labeled in her neat handwriting, with careful lines struck through it and Shauna's scrawl beside it:

always be my baby, talking through an entire song,

mariah carey jackie taylor & shauna shipman

Summer 2001

"Honestly, I already kind of wanna go again."

Jackie blinked at Van and scrunched her nose with a grin. It was their second time that week leaving the theater, both afternoons spent watching Legally Blonde. Well, this second time Van had watched Jackie a little more than the movie itself. She'd been going through a rough patch. They both did, all the time, but this one had been a little longer than usual, a little heavier than usual. Jackie had been crying more than laughing, but watching Reese Witherspoon act the absolute shit out of a very Jackie character had lit her pretty face up completely.

Van laughed and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her in. "We will," she promised. "But not today."

"No, not today," Jackie agreed, looping an arm around her waist. "Home, pajamas, nap. I'm fucking exhausted."

The walk to their apartment was short. It was almost a life that Van had imagined for herself—moderately shitty apartment, medicore job that she didn't hate, walking home with a beautiful woman on her arm. The differences laid in the details. Los Angeles, not New York. Dry heat rather than humid. Jackie instead of—

No.

She couldn't think like that.

It wasn't fucking fair. Not to herself, and definitely not to Jackie. Van was lucky to have her. She was beautiful and kind and funny. They liked the same movies, they had the same trauma, they understood each other. Except Van had to live, every single day, with the fact that she felt like she was tricking Jackie. Knowing that if Jackie had learned the truth about Shauna, she'd have fought tooth and nail to get to her. But Lottie knew what was best and Shauna was dangerous and all of that was behind them, anyways.

(Like hell it was. The woods weren't, the nightmares weren't, the constant ache for Taissa sure as fuck wasn't, and Jackie still cried for Shauna in her sleep.)

"Oh, thank God," Jackie sighed, as Van slipped the key into their door and pushed it open.

Everything they had was hand-me-down. They didn't want to leech off of Lottie, but they'd take the things she was done with. Jackie shopped the thrift stores a lot. A studio apartment with Lottie's old appliances and second hand linens and stains from the previous tenants rubbed permanently into the carpet. It didn't phase Van. It was nicer than her mom's trailer had been and it certainly beat the fucking cabin. What surprised her was that Jackie didn't seem to mind. She didn't push Van to accept money from Lottie. She didn't wish for more or long for the shit they couldn't afford.

Jackie seemed genuinely happy with what they had, so long as she could curl up next to Van at the end of the day.

By the time Van finished clicking all the locks into place, Jackie had already slipped off her dress and tossed it into the laundry bin. Van froze by the door, taking her in. She smirked. She rarely wore bras in the summer, so all she had to do was slip a baggy t-shirt on over her underwear and flop herself down into their bed. She laid on her stomach, her feet kicked up behind her, at a diagonal.

"C'mere," Jackie patted the comforter next to her and pouted just a bit.

Van laughed and kicked her shoes off. "I'm coming, I'm coming, you're just fast as hell." She changed into boxer shorts and a loose tee quickly, Jackie humming as she watched.

"Hmmm," Jackie said sweetly. "It sure seemed like you got a little distracted."

"Did it?" Van feigned confusion to watch Jackie giggle. "No idea what gave you that impression."

The second Van slid into bed, Jackie climbed on top of her. Her bleached blonde hair was a curtain around their faces. Van held her hips and smiled up at her.

"I thought we were napping," she said, raising a brow playfully.

"We are," Jackie nodded. She leaned forward slowly, her elbows planted on either side of Van's shoulders and her lips brushing against her jaw. "Totally gonna nap."

It was good with Jackie. Van trusted her. She'd been with a few women between Taissa and Jackie, but she'd never let any of them touch her the way Jackie did. The way only Tai

had before her. Van loved Jackie more than just about anyone else. It felt right, being with her. In so many fucking ways it did.

It felt right to slip her tongue into Jackie's mouth or her hand between her thighs. It felt right to let Jackie bury her face between her legs. To spend the afternoon in the air conditioned theater watching a movie they both adored, to come home and ignore the heat of their apartment while they fucked, their skin hot and sticking to the sheets, to let Jackie wrap an arm around her waist and tuck her nose into her hair and snore into her ear when she finally slept.

What didn't feel right was the fact that neither of them were fully in it. That neither of them ever would be. That around every fucking corner, no matter how much they thought they'd moved on, the memories of Taissa and Shauna—women that managed to haunt them, even though they were alive and well, tucked into their own beds on the other side of the country—were waiting to tug them back down.

Fall 2004

It was too much. Talia was too pretty. Her hair was too dark and too silky and her cheeks were too full and her voice was too high and her family was too sort-of-Jewish-sort-of-not.

She was too Shauna.

Jackie knew that about her going in. She wasn't fucking oblivious about it. It wasn't some subconscious desire that had taken control. Shauna was never in the back of her mind. She had a spot right in the center and she spread out in Jackie's body and wrapped around every part of her, squeezing her heart and extending to the tips of her fingers and shaping every fucking thing she did.

So, of course Jackie had seen Talia in a bar and thought of Shauna. Of course she'd bought her a drink and batted her eyes and taken her home. One night, she'd told herself. She could get her fill for one night, and then she had to be done.

One night turned into two—a long weekend spent in bed with a girl who looked and sounded a hell of a lot like the girl Jackie really wanted. Sex turned into dates, and dates turned into dating, and dating turned into moving in, and moving in turned into Talia proposing to her at her family's fucking Rosh Hashanah party.

(Not a legal marriage, obviously. But a party and a commitment and a ring on her fucking finger.)

And all of that—a whirlwind fifteen months—ended with Jackie on the bathroom floor of a hotel room, racking up international call charges.

"Why don't you come stay awhile?" Van broke the silence gently.

(Not true silence—snotty, blubbering, gasping sobs.)

Jackie nodded, as if Van could see her. "I will," she finally said.

She pulled herself up with a hand on the sink, her legs wobbling beneath her.

“Drink some water, Jack,” Van suggested. “You’re gonna dehydrate.”

“Yeah,” Jackie sniffed. ‘Let me put the phone down for just a minute.’ She wiped under her swollen eyes with a washcloth and stared at her reflection. Black from her mascara streaking down her cheeks and pink lipstick smeared around her lips from sobbing into her hands. “I just need to wash my face and find a fucking smoke.”

“You got it.”

Van didn’t protest or reason that it was smarter to hang up and recall, considering the per minute cost they were accruing. She knew Jackie needed her, so she waited on the line.

It only took three minutes for Jackie to get her shit together enough to shuffle onto the tiny balcony and light a cigarette, her long cardigan draped over her body like a blanket.

“Okay, I’m back,” she said into the phone, her voice much clearer.

“You drink something?” Van asked.

“Yeah.”

Some teens stumbled down the street below, arms slung around each other and bottles in hand. Jackie watched them pass.

“Good,” Van said. “How you feeling?”

“Just…” Jackie huffed out a frustrated sigh. “You know, I’ve been with a lot of women.”

Van laughed, caught off guard. The sound of it was enough to make Jackie smile, just a little.

“Yes, I do happen to know that.”

“And I’ve loved a lot of them,” Jackie continued. ‘But I’ve gotten over all of them.’ She took a drag. Van waited. “But not her. Never fucking her. Is that just… so endlessly fucking pathetic of me? We were kids. It wasn’t even… she didn’t even…”

“We grew up fast. Even before all that shit.” All that shit. Seclusion, starvation, death, pain. It was always that shit or out there. Van and Jackie weren’t lingerers. They didn’t sit in the details and relive the trauma. Not when they could help it, at least. “You are I weren’t fucking kids even when we were.”

“I know,” Jackie mumbled. Ash dropped onto her cardiagin, glowing orange. She flicked it away with her pinky.

“If you want—” Van paused, took a deep breath. “If you wanna try and figure out a way to tell her, then I’ll help you.”

Jackie laughed, short and curt. “Right, you’re sweet for that. But how exactly would that go? Hi, Shauna,” Jackie’s voice cracked on her name, “you remember me, right? Faked my death like ten years ago and you were so choked up about it, you married the boyfriend you fucked behind my back?”

“Maybe not that exactly,” Van chuckled. They’d both always been able to laugh in the worst times, about the worst things. Jackie cherished a lot of things about Van, but that was a

big one. She never had to worry if an ill-timed giggle would be seen as inappropriate. They both smiled and laughed and joked their way through so much of the heavy shit in life. “I think she’s… I think Shauna is a crazy fucking bitch. But I… don’t think she’d blow your cover. I don’t think she’d… fuck you over in that specific way. So… if you really think you need to—”

“No. She didn’t want me around then. She definitely wouldn’t forgive me for this shit,” Jackie shook her head too hard. Everything ached. “Besides, what would I even be asking for? I know you treated me like shit and tricked me and let me wander off to…” Jackie swallowed hard, “but—but I’m still this pathetic fucking puppy dog who’s so in love with you I can’t even be with anyone else, so please, won’t you give me a fucking scrap of affection?”

“You’re not pathetic,” Van said firmly. “You are a bit of a puppy, but it’s charming.”

Jackie snorted out a laugh. “Well, at least it’s charming.”

“I’ll do whatever you want, Jack,” Van promised. “Just… book a flight home, yeah? I’m worried about you.”

“I will,” Jackie sighed. “I gotta sleep and then— fuck— I gotta deal with getting my shit back. I’ll call you in the morning.”

Jackie didn’t sleep. She watched shitty rom-coms that she rented to the room until the sun came up, because every fucking time she closed her eyes, she saw Shauna’s face.

Fall 1996

“I think she’s safest here, until you know more.”

Laura Lee stood, brushing her hands on her knees gingerly. She’d been kneeling next to Jackie, who lay sleeping, bundled between layers of blankets and pelts and coats that Lottie and Van had smuggled away. She wasn’t Laura Lee, of course. Not in the physical sense. Lottie couldn’t run her fingers through her silky hair or take her hand between her own. She was there and she was not. She was energy, maybe—a spirit with free will. Or she was in Lottie’s head.

It didn’t matter, really.

She was right.

Lottie nodded and Laura Lee tucked herself into a corner. She did that sometimes, when Lottie needed prompting to focus on something else. When she stared for too long or held her silence in a crowded room.

“We can’t tell anyone,” Lottie said quietly.

Jackie shifted in her sleep, clutching Van’s shirt between fingers that were still far too cold.

“Lot…” Van’s entire face was pinched. She was in such deep pain.

Lottie sat on her knees in front of her, the concrete of the bunker floor cold and harsh. She took Van's cheek in her hand, just as Laura Lee had so often done for her. Grounding. Van let her eyes fall closed a stretch longer than a blink.

"Do you trust me?" Lottie asked.

Van took a deep breath. "I do. But—"

"She's safe right now," Lottie whispered. "And if we tell everyone that she's alive… I just don't think we'll be able to keep it that way. We need to give it time. We need to figure out what it wants."

"It's just… Shauna is so…" Van wiped tears off her cheeks roughly. "I don't think she's gonna be okay."

"Shauna made her choice," Laura Lee said softly. She was sympathetic, but stern. Her sea-glass eyes held the same conviction she'd had before stepping onto that god-forsaken plane. "She didn't save her. It didn't want her to be the one. It waited until it was just us."

Lottie echoed her. From Laura Lee's lips to her own—Lottie's mouth moving the very same way, her tongue pushing in all the same spots on her palette. She formed the syllables that Laura Lee had moments before her and they were closer for it. It was almost touch. It was almost enough.

Van accepted the words that Lottie gave her. Laura Lee nodded, then faded. It was a fresh wound each time she left. Screaming in the lake, fire overhead, ash falling down that Lottie prayed would return some of Laura Lee's body to her. Drinking of the water and bathing in it and submerging herself beneath it until her muscles ached and her lungs burned.

She didn't allow herself to linger on the pain. Lottie knew, by now, that Laura Lee would be back. And there was work to be done.

Summer 2008

Jackie texted when she was outside, her car idling in the drive. That's what she always did when she picked them up, never willing to broach the front door if she could avoid it, for fear of souring That Woman's mood.

Their house was over-large, too big for the block it sat on. It loomed over the homes next to it. Siobhan and her ex had bought two lots when the fancy new neighborhood was being developed, their house directly in the center, large side yards separating them from their neighbors.

Siobhan loved separation.

She loved consumption even more—pills and booze and Van Palmer's very personhood. Siobhan wanted to tear into Van. Rip off chunks of her strong flesh and filet her sweet heart and use her sunshine-red hair to stitch the pieces into a gown that she could drape across herself. But in order to do that, Siobhan needed to keep Van separate from the rest of the world.

Jackie had seen the evil in her immediately. She could read the plot behind her narrowed eyes and disappointed greetings and thinly veiled rage. Siobhan was careful. She was strategic—never allowing Van to witness her hatred for Jackie. It was methodical and practiced—she knew how to manipulate a situation for the outcome she wanted.

Siobhan was good, but Jackie was better. She would slip up one day. People like her always did.

They came out laughing. Sadie wore purple overall shorts, corduroy with tiny navy butterfly appliques. She'd squeal when she saw Jackie's outfit—simple Levi overalls to match, over a yellow tee. Em-Em hung under her arm and Van held her free hand. She wore her usual summer uniform—army green bermudas and a striped tee, a baseball cap pulled down over her long hair.

Van watched carefully as Sadie buckled herself into the booster seat that Jackie kept in her car—Siobhan hated that she'd bought it, bypassing the need to transfer one out of Siobhan's or Van's car completely—then she buckled the gray rabbit into the middle seat with the lap belt, at Sadie's request.

"Emmy!" Sadie squealed. Van hopped in the car. Jackie started backing out immediately. "Do they have ice cream at the berry patch?"

"I'm not sure, sweetie," Jackie flipped the AC higher. "But I am sure that we can find some ice cream today, if that's what you want."

Sadie kicked her little feet in excitement. A habit Siobhan tried to quell, just as Jackie's mom had when she was her age.

"Hold on," Van said, a conspiratorial grin pulling at her freckled cheeks. "I thought your plan was to eat so many berries, you'll turn into one and we'll have to stick you in a wheelbarrow and roll you out!"

Sadie giggled and shook her head, her pigtails whipping against her chin. "Nope!"

"A girl can always change her mind," Jackie grinned. "Ice cream is very convincing."

Van laughed and joked the entire time. She gave Sadie piggy-back rides and wiped sticky red off of her cheeks and hands and patiently plucked every berry she pointed to with little arms that couldn't quite reach. To Sadie, it was a perfect day. She never could've noticed the exhaustion in Van's movements or the sadness behind her eyes. It was expertly veiled.

But Jackie could feel it, heavy and dark over their heads. It loomed closer as the day slipped away from them, every passing hour chipping away at Van's facade. She thought about driving away with them. Switching on the child locks and turning up the radio to drown out Van's protests and heading straight for the border.

She couldn't, of course. It wasn't that simple. But Jackie would get them out eventually, no matter what it took.

Winter 2020

Jackie would know what to do. Sadie couldn't talk to her mom, because that was just… too much. Well, she could if she wanted to—she would never make Sadie feel like she shouldn't have shared something, but talking to her mom about this felt… uncomfortable.

She rolled out of bed while Midori was still asleep, careful not to disturb her. It was early, but Jackie would probably be up, scrolling on her phone or watching the news. Sadie shuffled to the guest room, where Jackie usually tried to stay most every night when she was home on breaks, and knocked quietly.

"Come in!" Jackie called.

She was half-sitting, half-laying in bed, just as Sadie had expected. She was both scrolling her phone and watching the news on the tiny television, which she flipped off when she saw Sadie. Her hair was messy and her pajamas were a wrinkled matching set, a jade green tee and jogger bottoms.

"Hi, honey," Jackie smiled, patting the bed next to her.

Sadie shut the door quietly and slipped into bed next to her, pulling the comforter up to her chin. She felt a blush spread across her cheeks. She hadn't thought this far ahead.

"What's wrong, sweetie?" Jackie sank lower in the bed, rolling to face her. She tucked her hands under her cheek and frowned.

"I just…" Sadie paused. Huffed out a breath. Rip the bandage off, rip the bandage off, rip the—

"Mimi," Jackie said gently, rubbing a hand up and down her shoulder briefly. Her nickname since she was little—based off of a name that wasn't her first, a matching set to Emmy. Sadie still called her Emmy, most of the time. It rolled off of her tongue better. But she tried not to when other people were around, sticking with whatever alias she was operating under.

"I-think-I-have-a-crush-on-her."

It came out as one word, fueled by a single breath. She hadn't said it out loud until that very moment, because saying it out loud made it real. She and Midori had been friends since day one, their carts bumping into each other on move-in day like wayward bumper cars. Midori had been alone. Sadie'd had her mom, Jackie, and Lottie with her, and Jackie had immediately offered their help unloading Midori's things into her room three doors down.

The first thing Sadie had noticed was her hair, shiny and silky, near-black, the ends grazing the bottom of her shoulder blades. Then her smile, slightly lopsided. A little uncomfortable, probably, trying to do the mental math on what must've looked like the crazy girl with three moms. Her eyes—a bright brown that made Sadie feel a little swoopy.

Pretty. That was the point. So very pretty.

They'd all gone to dinner that night. A stupidly fancy place. Lottie had whipped out her black card to pay and Midori had watched her intently, equal parts impressed and suspicious. (Sadie had noticed her eyeing the receipt on the way out, checking the tip Lottie had left and nodding in surprised approval.)

They'd made fast friends. That's how it worked in college. That was normal. So, Sadie had invited Midori home for Thanksgiving break, because her family was on the other side of the country and almost certainly comprised of fucking assholes based on the little information Sadie had gathered on them. And now they were back for winter break and Sadie had spent four nights sleeping next to her and she couldn't ignore the butterflies in her stomach or the hammering of her heart for one more fucking second.

Sadie had to confess.

It felt good for one beautiful moment, getting it off of her chest. She drew in a relieved breath. But on the exhale came the tears, streaking fast and hot down her cheeks.

"Oh, darling, come here," Jackie cooed. Sadie let her wrap her arms around her. She cried into her shoulder and hugged her tight. She hadn't broken down like this in ages. She felt like a dumb kid, gasping for breath, snot running onto Jackie's shirt. "It's okay. Deep breaths. Everything's okay, yeah?"

Sadie nodded, choking on her cries. Jackie rubbed her back until she calmed enough to pull away, wiping at her face.

"I think," Jackie said carefully, 'that it's always scary to realize you have feelings for somebody. Especially somebody you're close to.' She pulled some tissues out of the box on the nightstand and handed them to Sadie. "But, I think it can also be a wonderful thing. And… I have a little hunch that she feels the same, Mimi."

"Did—do—was it obvious that I—"

"To me? Absolutely," Jackie chuckled. "But I know you, kiddo. I think she's probably just as in the dark about how you feel for her, as you are about how she feels for you. But you bet your ass your mom and I have discussed it."

"Oh, God," Sadie groaned. She blew her nose roughly. "What do I do?"

"Well, sweetie, you just gotta tell her," Jackie said, as if it was the simplest thing on the planet. "It'll eat you up if you don't. You can't do that to yourself."

It already was eating her up, if two sleepless nights spent worrying about how she was laying or whether she might snore and sobbing into Jackie's chest like she was in elementary school again were good indicators.

"You're right," Sadie rubbed her eyes with a closed fist.

"I think it's gonna go really well, honey," Jackie soothed. "I really do. But… maybe wait until you're back at school? Just… no matter which way it goes, being stuck here might be a little—"

"God, yeah," Sadie interrupted quickly. "Don't worry, I'm for sure gonna wait."

Spring 2009

Jackie wanted Siobhan dead. She wanted her six feet fucking under. Jackie had killed before, but she'd never actually wanted someone dead. Never before had she fallen to her

knees to pray to a God that she wasn't sure she believed in, to beg for an outcome that would probably make her a sinner in the eyes of that God, anyway.

Van was alive. She was safe and home and okay. Jackie repeated her mantra over and over, because it was the only thing keeping her grounded.

Van stirred in her sleep. Lottie sat up a little, making eye contact with Jackie from over Van's shoulder. Her hand was perched on Van's hip, her chest against her back. The window behind her was thrown open to let the breeze in. They'd only been at The Manor for a few hours, the drive from the hospital long and bumpy, but they'd immediately settled in the master bedroom.

Van shifted, her cheek sliding against Jackie's shoulder, but resettled, her arm tighter around Jackie's waist. Jackie tucked her chin so she could drop a barely-there kiss to the top of her silky hair. She and Lottie had her, now. They'd take care of everything, because Siobhan had taken everything from Van. She'd stripped her of most of her casual friends. She'd convinced her to quit her job and stay at home. She'd given her an ultimatum—never speak to Jackie again, or they were done.

And then she'd done the worst thing she could possibly do. She'd taken Sadie away from Van completely.

Van may have been in Sadie's life for a fraction of the time, but she was more Sadie's mom than Siobhan had ever been. So, it made sense when three weeks after the breakup, Jackie had bolted awake in the middle of the night. Van hadn't answered her call, but Lottie had on the first ring.

"I'll meet you there," was all Lottie had said. It's all she'd needed to say. They'd both known that something was horribly fucking wrong.

Van had insisted on space, signing a short-term lease on a studio apartment a mile away from Jackie's place. Jackie had cleared that mile in less than a minute.

Jackie Taylor was sick of blood. She saw blood when she closed her eyes. Unbidden images of it—mixed with brain matter and staining a wall, painting Van and Lottie nearly head to toe as they explained to Jackie that it was gushing out of Shauna and they couldn't stop it, pouring out of her own body, intentionally spilt countless times.

This had been worse. Dripping off of Van's pale skin onto paler bathroom tile. Coating the bottom of the slippers Jackie had thrown on in her hurry. Spreading across her arms as she hoisted Van into them.

Enough.

Jackie'd had more than enough blood to last a lifetime.

That Woman was going to fucking pay.

Fall 1993

The Wiskayok High auditorium was much bigger than the middle school's had been. The bleachers were packed already. The first assembly of the year, and Misty was late getting there. She'd dropped her lunch tray and everything had spilled out onto the shiny checkered floor. A thick smear of red still clung to the hem of her jeans, because there was never enough cheese on the cafeteria pizza to actually cover the sauce. By the time she'd cleaned the mess with those brown paper towels that didn't actually absorb anything and ran to the bathroom to mop uselessly at the stains on her clothes and sternly told herself that only babies cry, it was two minutes until the homecoming assembly.

She scanned the crowd for familiar faces and found two to latch onto. Jackie Taylor and Shauna Shipman sat on the bottom row, Shauna against the wall with her backpack between her knees, like she was already counting down the seconds until they could bolt. Her hair was in a low ponytail and she wore a heavy flannel over a tight, black t-shirt. She'd always been curvy. Misty had heard she'd started wearing a real bra in fifth grade. The fabric clung to her chest and dipped in at her waist. She pulled her flannel closer around her body suddenly. Misty looked up at her face—she was staring at her, scowling.

Misty thought about changing course, but Shauna was usually pretty harmless, even when she looked less than thrilled. She was quiet and observant and she only really laughed or smiled for Jackie anyway, and Misty's options were slim. Jackie tapped Shauna's shoulder and pouted at her, saying something to her that Misty couldn't make out. Shauna shook her head and Jackie shrugged and Misty's feet had carried her right in front of them.

"Hi," Misty said, trying on a grin. Her cheeks ached a little. Jackie smiled back, but she looked a touch confused. Shauna raised an eyebrow. Misty toned it down a few notches, her lips relaxing.

"Hi, Misty," Jackie tilted her head to the side. Her hair swung behind her shoulders, not quite brown and not quite blonde. Her smile was always pretty, no matter matter how wide she opened her mouth or how much she bared her teeth.

"I was late," Misty squeezed her hands into fists at her sides. "Spilled my tray." She giggled some.

"Oh," Jackie blinked. Sympathetic. Shauna pretended to be interested in the Vice Principal, as he tapped on the mic and made feedback squeak through the speakers. "Well, you didn't miss anything!"

"Could I sit here?" Misty asked quickly, waving to the spot next to Jackie. The girl on the other side of her was someone Misty didn't know. Her head was turned all the way to the row behind her as she chatted with friends. There was almost enough room for someone else between them.

"Oh!" Jackie chimed. She sounded almost relieved, but Misty couldn't quite place why. 'Of course. Shauna?' she turned to her and wrapped her fingers around her bicep. Her baby pink nail polish stood out against the dark red pattern of Shauna's flannel. Misty watched her thumb dance back and forth. "Could you scoot a little?"

Shauna sighed through her nose. "Sure." She fixed a small smile onto her face and slid over until she was flush against the wall. Jackie tucked herself against Shauna. They touched from shoulder to hip to ankle, pink and denim against black and red.

They should have clashed, really, but for some reason they didn't.

Winter 2019

"So, you still feel good then?" Van wiped her forehead with a rag, mopping up the sweat above her brow.

Jackie leaned back against the kitchen counter and grinned, cracking open a water bottle. Boxes were stacked all around them, marked by room of destination in colored sharpie.

"Scared I'm gonna change my mind now that we've moved everything in?" Jackie teased.

"A little, yeah," Van laughed. "But I wouldn't be mad, y'know. Wouldn't even comment. I'd just turn around, press rewind, and haul all this shit back out. We still have the U-Haul for another three hours."

"God, can you imagine?" Jackie handed Van the water, twisting the thin plastic cap between her fingers.

"Actually, Jack, I really fucking can."

Jackie washed her hands while Van chugged the rest of the bottle. "Well, you don't need to worry. I still feel good."

Rachel was just right. Jackie had been cautious in letting herself grow closer to her. Their relationship was curated. She was sweet and easy-going. She didn't want marriage or kids. Jackie loved her. Really, she did. Just… not so much that it hurt. Loving Rachel wasn't scary or consuming. It didn't feel like betrayal.

(Jackie had come to terms, over many years and plenty of agonizing, with the fact that loving too hard would always feel like a betrayal, like it might take away from the memories that she clung to so fucking desperately, like it might stain her past with a woman who shared a fucking bed with her own betrayal, unbothered and unmarked. That was why she and Van hadn't worked together. It was why Van did the same careful dance with the women she dated. They'd never belong to anyone else but the women they'd left in the woods, so they'd both made their peace with the loopholes they could forge.)

"Good," Van pulled her into a hug. Jackie squeezed her tight around the waist. "So, return the U-Haul and then grab takeout?"

"Yeah," Jackie nodded against her. "Rachel should be home from work by the time we're back, so let's get that Thai place she likes?"

"Sounds perfect."

Perfect. As close to it as Jackie would ever let herself get.

Spring 1996

“So, I was thinking we could start a chore wheel,” Misty blabbered excitedly, “and I could assign people tasks, since I’m team manager and all, but I’d need some paper from your—”

The door creaked open. Misty finally paused to take a breath, thrown off by the disruption.

“Yeah, Misty,” Shauna mumbled noncommittally, “I’ll, uh, think about it.”

Jackie was the last one through the door, Lottie and Mari trudging in before her. Shauna crossed her legs beneath her, waiting for Jackie to sit beside her so that Misty would wander off and find a new captive audience. She flashed Jackie a brief help me look and Jackie smiled in return, wiping her hands off on her shorts and lining her sneakers up next to the door.

“Well, you don’t have to do too much thinking!” Misty chimed. “That’s the point, I can sort it out. I might get Ben to help me.”

Lottie caught Jackie’s arm just as she started toward Shauna. Her face was tense and pinched. Shauna frowned and waved a dismissive hand toward Misty, tuning into Lottie’s nervous voice.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Jackie?” Lottie stared Jackie up and down, like she was assessing for damage. “That was… intense.”

Shauna sat up straight, frowning at the pair of them. Jackie’s smile had faded, but it was still there. That didn’t mean much on its own—Shauna had watched Jackie smile her way through an angry Coach Martinez reaming her out and her drunk mother scaring the shit out of her enough times to know that.

“I’m fine, Lottie,” Jackie assured her. “Really, it wasn’t that—”

Misty’s squeak eclipsed the rest of Jackie’s response.

“Shauna, what are you—”

“Shut the fuck up, Misty,” Shauna snapped. Misty had the fucking audacity to look hurt, as if Shauna hadn’t been politely humoring her for ages, jerking her chin back so quickly her frizzy curls swayed a few times. ‘Just—Jackie?’ Shauna tilted her head at her. “What happened?”

Jackie swiveled toward her and Lottie dropped her arm, chewing her lip. Jackie’s expression was unreadable. She looked down for half a second, avoiding Shauna’s eyes.

“Nothing, really,” Jackie landed on weakly. Fucking bullshit.

Shauna stood, holding the wall for support on the way up. Her hands were shaking, but she couldn’t quite place it. Something felt wrong— her stomach twisting angrily. Half the girls in the cabin were avoiding Shauna’s eyes, looking fixedly anywhere but her or Jackie.

Misty opened her mouth again, and for once Shauna was grateful.

“Oh, didn’t you hear?” She spoke as if she had a Mari-worthy piece of fucking gossip to deliver. Her tone was nowhere near the serious one Lottie had taken. She was excited. Shauna scrunched her nose in disgust as she shook her head. “We were clearing the plane off and—”

“Misty,” Jackie interrupted. She was halfway to them, scurrying around the girls sprawled out on the ground. “It’s not really—”

“The plane started totally unexpectedly and Jackie shoved Van out of the way of the propellers.” Misty pushed on, either oblivious to Jackie or pretending to be. “It was a super close call. Like, inches from Jackie’s nose! Isn’t that wild?”

Shauna’s chest tightened, pressing all the air out of her lungs. She wheezed like she had as a little kid, asthma that she eventually grew out of knocking the wind out of her body during spring games when she ran too hard.

“You—it—the plane?” Shauna sputtered.

She shook her head quickly. Embarrassment tried to cut through the terror, a small part of her recognizing how strong this reaction was. Jackie was fine. She stood in front of Shauna, unharmed. But tears were pricking the back of Shauna’s eyes and her throat was closing and everyone was staring at her, because she couldn’t stand the thought of Jackie stepping in front of that goddamn—

“Hey,” Jackie closed her fingers around Shauna’s wrist gently. “Why don’t we go get some air?”

Jackie didn’t want everyone to see Shauna’s reaction. She was always so careful about that—hiding their more… intense moments from the rest of the team. But why the fuck should they even care at this point? They were stranded in the goddamn wilderness. They might die out here.

Jackie might die.

Jackie might die and Shauna might have to live without her.

Jackie led her through the cabin and out the door. They went straight out in their sock-feet, Jackie urging Shauna to sit with her immediately, their backs against the wall.

“Jackie,” Shauna sobbed, her name bubbling up in desperate prayer. She covered her mouth with trembling hands. Jackie’s eyes widened just a little.

Shauna had lost control of her emotions entirely. It was always hard to manage them, but something was making it impossible lately. The trauma of a plane crash and witnessing violent death and having no hope, probably. Anger and sadness and pain were on the tip of her tongue at every turn. Jackie was pissing her off, scratching itches that she shouldn’t be scratching, and driving her mad, being a bitch and making it personal, just because Shauna thought that Taissa had a better idea for their literal survival, and scaring her shitless, standing in front of a dead man’s rusty ass plane and nearly getting her head chopped off.

Jackie wrapped herself all the way around Shauna. Shauna didn’t even notice it happening until she was tight against her chest. She took her hands away from her mouth—not an easy feat, with the way Jackie was squeezing her impossibly close, her arms far too strong for how tiny they were. She clawed at Jackie’s back.

“Shauna,” Jackie said softly. She was crying, too. She usually did, if Shauna cried hard enough.

There was never a broken bone or hurt feeling that was solely Shauna's. It was always a little bit Jackie's, too. Every missed visitation from her asshole father or trip to her bubbe's hospital room hurt Jackie. Shauna couldn't just be sad without feeling like she was sharing it. Watching Jackie cry made her nauseous. Her eyes went too wide for her pretty face and her lip jutted out too far and she trembled something fierce and Shauna had to decide whether it was worth crying in front of her at all, since she knew what was coming.

It was worth it now, though. This was one of those times that Shauna saw it differently. Jackie was sitting in this with her. She was recognizing how fucking terrified Shauna was and sinking into that with her so that she wouldn't be alone.

"I'm sorry, okay?" Jackie spoke directly into Shauna's hair—Shauna could feel her breath against her scalp if she focused hard enough. "I'm okay. Everyone's okay. Nothing bad happened."

Everything bad had happened. Even before they crashed into the wilderness, bad had been happening. Jackie was just too fucking oblivious to see it.

Shauna pushed one hand up under her shirt to feel the bare skin of her lower back. Risky. In private it wasn't. Not anymore. They touched like that all the time. But in public? Somewhere they might get caught? Usually they required the presence of alcohol, their iron-clad alibi. But Shauna didn't think the same fucking rules should apply after you've hurtled to you death and survived it, so she felt for the dimple low on Jackie's back and pressed her fingers against it. Jackie didn't react.

"You can't do that," Shauna whispered. Her nose was against Jackie's neck, her face right where Jackie had guided it. Shauna rested her lips against her skin for a moment—not a kiss. Not technically. She didn't purse her lips or part them. Jackie ran a hand through her hair. "You can't do dangerous shit and—and leave me out here. I can't do it without you."

Shauna couldn't do anything without Jackie. Not just here. Not just now. She needed her like water —making her laugh a small sip, touching her like this a mouthful. Desperate. Dependent. Pathetic.

"Hey, hey," Jackie shushed. 'You won't have to. I swear Misty was exaggerating. I'm not going anywhere, Shipman.' Jackie slid her fingers against Shauna's hip where her shirt had ridden up—telling her without words that it was okay, that Shauna could keep running her hand across her spine. "You can't get rid of me that easy. I promise."

A promise from Jackie was enough to quench Shauna's thirst completely.

They sat until Shauna was ready to move. Jackie wiped away both their tears and led Shauna inside. Later, when they curled up to sleep and images of Jackie being crushed under the plane's wheels or cut by its jagged edges flooded her mind's eye, Shauna counted her breaths to sweep them away.

27. you belong to me

December 27th, 2021

6:03 pm

"Shauna!" Taissa crouched in front of her. Gravel clung to the knees of her jeans where she'd been kneeling, until Shauna had gone silent and Tai had started trying to pull her to her feet. Shauna was wrecked. Her hair was plastered to her cheeks. Tears and snot coated her skin. Saliva clung to her lips and chin in thin strands. Her mouth was an oval, the ghost of a scream, but she'd gone mute. "Shauna, come on. Stay with me. Shauna! Shauna—"

"We gotta fucking go!" Van shouted. "Shauna, we're losing time! Get the fuck—"

"Give her a second." Nat sank to the ground behind Shauna, her hands gripping her waist lightly. Lottie knew what she was doing—stopping Shauna from slamming herself forward. Because once she was flat on the ground, dead weight, kicking and hitting and biting indiscriminately, there wasn't much they could do. "Shipman, we've got you. But it's time to get in the car and go help them, okay? You can… kick the back of my fucking seat the whole way if you want, but we gotta get mobile, yeah?"

Her.

Nat should've said go help her, because Lottie knew that there was only room in Shauna's mind for Jackie right now. She was close to gone. She was her base self. And Lottie wasn't even sure that girl knew she had a daughter.

"Taissa." Lottie rested a hand on her shoulder. Tai flinched and shot her a glare. "Let me."

"Lot," Van snapped. Her face was bright red. Her eyes were full of terror, not anger like the venom in her tone would suggest. She kept edging toward the car. If they didn't get Shauna up soon, she was going to leave on her own, bolt into instinct and run. "She'll fucking kill you. And I know she will because I love you and I'm nowhere near as violent as Shauna fucking Shipman and I'm close to—"

"She won't. She's barely even aware right now," Lottie insisted. "Let me try."

"We've got to try something." Misty shifted on her feet. "I really don't like giving them this much of a head start."

Van shot Misty a glare, her upper lip twitching, her face the closest to murder Lottie's seen it since out there.

"Van," Lottie interrupted, gently. "Why don't you start the car?"

"Whoa, uh, are we sure that's—" Nat stood slowly, eyeing the two of them.

"Yes." Lottie nodded. "Van, start the car. Whoever wants to get in can. Give me five minutes, and if I can't get Shauna there, you can leave."

“Lot, we’re not leaving anyone.” Nat frowned at her. She sank back behind Shauna. Impossibly young, even with all the lines that time had etched into her face. Scared behind her determination.

“Fine,” Van agreed. “Taissa, let her try.”

“You want to trust her after she—”

“Let her,” Van begged.

“You can stand right next to me.” Lottie pushed Tai’s shoulders gently, urging her out of the way.

“Fine,” Tai spat. She shifted to Shauna’s left, clearing the space directly in front of her. “But if she hurts you, I don’t feel particularly inclined to intervene right now.”

Lottie waved a dismissive hand. “Great.”

Van and Misty headed to the car. Nat stayed put behind Shauna, eyeing the three of wearily, but she didn’t speak.

Lottie sank to her knees. Shauna had her palms on the ground in front of her, digging into the gravel. Blood stained the rocks closest to her hands. There was a spark behind her eyes, but it was dimming quickly. Oxygen-starved. Lottie took her cheeks and tilted her chin up. “Natalie, can you help her sit up straight?” Lottie asked softly. Nat took Shauna’s shoulders from behind, urging her to shift her weight back until she was no longer on all fours. “Good,” Lottie murmured.

She tugged the sleeve of her sweater down over her hand and mopped up the mess on Shauna’s face. She’d always remained the youngest of them, inside and out. Full cheeks. Her face a moon, with beautiful deep craters of brown—eyes that pulled you in and wove you a story, spinning fact and fiction into a single strand. It was scary when they went empty. Lottie rolled her sleeves up. She took Shauna’s cheeks again, pitched forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “She will be okay,” she whispered against her skin. “And you will have her.”

“Lottie, this isn’t—”

Lottie flashed Tai a look to silence her. She rolled her eyes, but closed her lips.

Lottie pulled back. She kept her left hand in place, her thumb smoothing over Shauna’s cheekbone. Then, before Natalie or Taissa could stop her, she pulled her right hand back and slapped Shauna hard, guiding her head into a gentle twist with the motion.

“Lot!”

“You crazy fucking—”

Tai lunged for her. Lottie held her hands up in surrender, open and in front of her own shoulders. Shauna blinked hard. Then harder. Then she stared at Lottie and it was her behind her eyes. Tai knelt again, a hand held steady between their bodies and her gaze on Shauna’s pretty face, her eyes swollen and her cheek an angry pink.

“What the fuck?” Shauna croaked out. Her voice was thick with mucus and pain. “What’s wrong with—” she choked on the tears that suddenly overtook her again. Good. Crying meant

present. “You fucking cunt, you—you—” Sobs shook her shoulders. Natalie looked close to tears herself, though she’d never let them fall. Not now. Not when they needed protecting. She wrapped her arms around Shauna’s waist slowly, giving her time to smack them away. When she didn’t, Nat perched her chin on her shoulder. Shauna cried harder, squeezing Natalie’s forearms. Smears of Shauna’s blood stained Nat’s fair skin where her palms slid against it. “I can’t—I can’t—”

“You can,” Lottie said firmly. ‘Tai, I’m going to touch her.’ Taissa fisted the front of her shirt, shoving her back. “Gently,” Lottie promised. Tai released her tentatively, shifting her hand to Shauna’s thigh, still forming a barrier between them with her arm. Lottie put one hand under Shauna’s chin and laid the other on the side of her head, cradling it. “You can do this and you will. We’re going to help you. You’re not alone. And she’s not gone.” Shauna wailed. Lottie pressed her thumb over her lips, sealing them. Shauna’s jaw trembled beneath her hand. “Jackie’s okay. But if you go away right now, she won’t be. If you don’t get up with us and get in the car and help us find her, she will die. You can’t shut down. You can’t run away from this. You are not letting her walk out into the woods to kill herself again—”

“Lot.” Nat shook her head.

“—because this time, you’re going after her. You’re going to bring her home, Shauna. But to do that, you need to get up and stay with us.” Lottie rose to her feet. Shauna nodded once, a curt bob of her chin. “Good,” Lottie said softly. “Let’s go.”

Shauna took Lottie’s outstretched hand. Natalie and Tai helped her to her feet. And, together, they walked back to the van.

“Four minutes,” Misty chimed, as Taissa slid the door open. “Not bad!”

7:49 pm

“Can’t you go any faster?”

“I’d be quicker without the rope,” Jackie huffed. James—she’d learned their names from listening to them talk to each other, fucking dumbasses—had stepped on her heel again, hurrying her along. Shauna used to do that all the time when they were kids. Flat-tire her, they’d called it. Not because she was in a hurry, but because she was in her own world as they walked. (And because she liked to be as close to Jackie as possible.) “And watch where you’re stepping.” Jackie turned back to glare at him.

He couldn’t be much older than Sadie. The younger side for this… group. A dark mop of hair and a patchy beard. A handgun pointed lazily at Jackie’s back. Impatient. Sloppy. He scrunched his nose at her.

“It isn’t on your legs,” Morgan chimed in. ‘You have full range of motion with your steps.’ She was halfway between James’ age and Jackie’s, thin blonde hair pulled into a ponytail. Her clothes were expensive—Patagonia and Columbia, brand-name hiking gear head to toe. “But James, let the woman walk at her own speed. We’re in no great hurry.”

The trees were growing denser. Morgan’s flashlight barely illuminated their path. Jackie could see her own breath, billowing into soft clouds on every exhale.

“How long until we get to Callie?” Jackie asked, watching the ground in front of her for stray roots and boulders. “I’m not going….wherever the fuck it was that you want me until you let her go. The shelter, is that what you called it?”

“The sequester,” they said in tandem.

“Alright,” Jackie sighed. “The sequester. Interesting name. How much further to her?”

“Hmmm. Actually, I’m pretty sure—” Morgan shined the light against the trees as they passed. “Ah, yes. A couple more minutes.” Wielding her spotlight, she narrowed in on a spot just above their heads. The fucking symbol carved into bark, barely discernable if you weren’t looking for it. Good. They’d been marking trails. Banking on the women not noticing, Jackie was sure, but Natalie would notice.

If they were coming, that was. If they’d managed to hold Shauna together. If Jackie hadn’t broken her completely. Van would be coming. Jackie knew that. She’d stave off the stress with action, until she was certain that there was no hope. But Shauna… Jackie’s heart thudded harder until each beat was a freight train, rattling her ribs as it passed. No. She couldn’t think about her right now. Everything would be okay. Everything would—

“Where are we going? Can you fucking freaks open your mouths and make some words happen, or are you too stupid to even—”

“Oh my God! Shouldn’t you be too scared to talk? We literally have guns pointed—”

Callie.

Jackie had only met her for a short time, but already she’d know that voice anywhere. Shauna’s daughter. Of course Jackie had memorized everything she could about her. And of course Shauna’s daughter was talking back to her fucking kidnappers.

“Callie!” Jackie yelled, slipping into a light jog toward the sound of the voices.

“Jackie?” Callie hollered back.

“Yes! Oh, thank God. You’re okay, everything’s—”

“Whoa!” James fisted the back of Jackie’s coat and yanked her back. “Slow down.”

“Get your fucking hands off of me,” Jackie snapped. He released her with a grunt. “What, can’t you go any faster?”

“Okay, everyone calm down—” Morgan said coolly.

“I told you not to touch me, you fucking nasty-ass freak.” Callie’s voice grew louder. They must be close. The beam of another flashlight reflected dully off of the trees around them. “I swear to God I’ll—”

“Ouch!” a man yelped. “She fucking bit me! You fucking cunt—”

Good girl.

“Oh dear,” Morgan muttered under her breath, breaking into a jog. Jackie tore after her until they hit a run, James be damned. “Andrew! Just wait. Don’t touch her, just stay put!”

Even in this, the woman was holding it together. Managing these idiot fucking men. Morgan might as well have been trying to herd wild animals. Stupid of them to let men into this thing in the first place, but thank God they had. Walking liabilities. Jackie's former teammates were going to rip them to shreds without breaking a fucking sweat.

Wham. Morgan collided into a man. Tall, probably over six feet. Andrew, judging by the way his forearm was dripping blood. Two women stood beside him, both with guns and flashlights trained on Callie.

Callie.

She seemed unharmed, bundled in what looked like multiple layers of fleece sweaters that probably belonged to the women of this freaky fucking cult. Blood was smeared across her chin and she was leering at Andrew as he clutched his arm.

"Oh, honey," Jackie breathed, stepping into the light. Callie's face softened. In an instant she transitioned from stone-cold fighter to scared little girl. Jackie tried to open her arms instinctually, but her wrists were still bound. 'Fuck,' she muttered, raising them above her head with bent elbows. "Come here, sweetie. Come here, it's okay." Callie stepped forward, her own wrists tied, and planted her face into the crook of Jackie's neck. Jackie brought her arms down around her, using the heels of her palms to pull Callie closer. "Everything's gonna be okay."

8:22 pm

"Shipman," Natalie said, "you've gotta eat something. Anything. What do you want?"

Van was pumping gas, Tai hovering next to her. Their heads were bowed and they were speaking quickly. Nat was trying to take everyone's order for their convenience store dinner. This was the last stop before the service roads and then it would be fucking hiking and rationing, and Shauna had been shit about eating all goddamn day. Lottie and Misty had rambled off their choices—Misty wanted jerky, because of course she did—but Shauna's lips had remained stubbornly sealed.

"Chips?" Nat suggested. "You like sour cream and onion, right? Candy?"

Shauna scrunched her face in disgust. She still hadn't spoken, but she'd nodded and shook her head and made her little sarcastic fucking faces frequently enough that it was clear that she was still in there.

"Right, I'll figure it out," Nat grumbled. She jumped out of the car and swung the door shut behind herself.

"Nat," Tai mumbled quietly, catching Nat's arm. She eyed Misty in the passenger seat for a second. Nat raised a brow to urge her to spit it out. "You've got to control your women."

"Excuse me?" Nat scoffed. "What kind of backwards-ass—"

Tai put a finger to her lips in a shushing motion. "You know what I mean. Lottie and Misty can't be going rogue like this, we need you to rein them in."

“My women?” Nat whisper-yelled. “Lottie is a fucking cult leader and Misty has a fucking murder basement, I can’t exactly… put them on a leash!”

Van shook her head. She was paler than usual. All the color had left her the moment they’d realized Jackie was gone. There was a slight tremor in her hands.

Tai crossed her arms and took a deep breath. She was doing that annoying thing she did when she was terrified—trying to curb her fear by taking charge and that taking charge so often included bossing Natalie the fuck around. “You could try a little harder,” she insisted.

“For fuck’s sake, Taissa! Why don’t you go ahead and control Shauna fucking Shipman?”

“Wait, that’s a good point.” Van frowned, slipping the pump back into place.

“What?” Tai asked incredulously. “You’re on her side for this?”

“No,” Van whispered. “Well, kind of, yeah. But I meant that if all three of us are out here, those three are unsupervised right now. And apparently, that means that we need to be worried about them planning some kind of bullshit without—”

“Fuck,” Nat muttered. “You’re right.”

“Okay. Tai, you’re on Shauna,” Van directed. “I’ll take Lot. Nat, you take Misty.”

“Do I have to—”

“Yes,” Van and Taissa said at once.

“Fine. Get in there and watch her for me for just a minute, will you?” Nat asked, cloyingly sweet. “I’m getting us food and taking a piss.”

“I’ll get in,” Van opened the driver’s door quickly, cutting off the conversation. “You two run in together. No one should be alone.”

8:46 pm

“It looks like they aren’t planning to do the… uh… ritual until New Year’s Eve. Weirdly festive of them.” Midori was using the same tone she’d used all day. One of her go-tos—calm, focused, a touch sarcastic. So smooth in chaos. Everything around them going to hell always put her in her element. And thank God for that, because Sadie couldn’t imagine anyone else in the world managing to keep up with her family. “So that gives them four days to find her.”

“Callie,” Sadie mumbled. She merged to the right. They were nearing their exit, and then it was just twenty minutes on smaller roads to get to the trailhead. “Pretty name.”

“Very pretty.” Midori took a hand off of her laptop for the first time in hours—they’d been using Sadie’s hotspot so that she could gather as much information as possible—and ran it through Sadie’s hair. “Everything I know about them tells me that they’re gonna get her out in one piece. And when am I ever wrong?”

Sadie chuckled, batting at her cheek to swipe away the tears that’d slipped. “Never.” She rolled her eyes playfully. Midori rubbed her back slowly. “It’s just… she’s only sixteen. It’s

awful and I should be more worried about her but I'm just—I feel so selfish. I don't… I don't think I want them going in after her like this."

The admission hung heavily in the air for a brief moment, guilt clawing at Sadie. But Midori managed to wave it away into nothing, sending it off to disperse and lighten. "Yeah, well, if you didn't feel that way, I'd be worried," she said, matter-of-fact. 'Sades, you didn't try to stop them. You're actively helping them do this. You're just scared of losing people you love. That's absolutely normal and you,' Midori leaned in to kiss her cheek, "are truly a fucking badass for being so okay right now."

"Thanks." Sadie took her hand. "I don't feel very okay. I feel a little like I'm losing my fucking mind."

"No. Of course you don't feel okay." Midori shook her head. "But you're doing what you need to do. And we'll patch you back up when it's over."

Sadie nodded, squeezing her hand tight. She couldn't open her mouth. She couldn't speak just that second, because she was thinking about her mom heading into danger, back into the woods, the same fucking way she'd gotten the scars that Sadie used to trace when she was a little girl. Jackie putting herself at risk, because Sadie had no doubt that she'd sacrifice her own life for anyone's child, let alone this child. Lottie who already had such a hard time with daily life, opening herself up to fresh wounds. And the rest of them—Natalie, who Sadie knew had been her mom's best friend as a little girl. Shauna and Taissa, who Jackie and her mother had discussed with the careful reverence that only came from love and heartbreak (and with who Sadie was pretty sure they'd gotten back together, because on that video call she'd immediately noticed that Jackie and Shauna both had hickeys on their necks and her mom and Taissa had been touching each other way more than was casually friendly and Sadie just wanted to sit on the porch and grill them while she sipped on one of the fancy Shirley Temples her mom always made her). Even weird Misty, who Sadie had never heard much about, but honestly seemed to be the one looking out for their well-being the most.

"I should call them," Midori said softly. "Tell them about that timeline. I'm also way more confident in my guess now. I'm pretty sure that's the exact lake they're headed to."

"Yeah," Sadie managed. She took the exit slowly. The night was pitch black with no street lights to illuminate it. Beyond ominous. "I think we'll lose service on these back roads."

9:01 pm

"Jeff?" Tai asked sharply. He'd picked up her call almost immediately, but there was silence on the line. That's just what she needed—another person in Shauna's life fucking kidnapped. Though, truth be told, Shauna would almost certainly shrug him off, if not feel a sense of actual relief at his disappearance. "Are you there?"

"Sorry," he answered. 'I was just putting it on speaker.' He sounded exhausted. Distraught. An appropriate reaction to his daughter being held hostage by a murderous cult. (Besides the willingness to not get police involved and to sit in the parking lot while his wife and her friends went to save her, of course.) "What's up?"

Taissa had the horrible job of bringing the hammer down even harder. She knew his feelings toward Jackie were… complicated at best, but she didn't think he'd take kindly to the news of her little stunt. Tai watched Shauna carefully in the visor mirror that she'd conspicuously left down to keep an eye on her. She sat in the middle row, Nat beside her. Nat had encouraged her to eat, somehow managing to get a power bar down her. She still hadn't spoken.

Tai eyed Van next—driving steadily. Exactly ten miles over the speed limit to avoid being pulled over. Careful and calculated and determined. Pain radiated from her in waves. The lines in her face were shallower, because she'd been in a constant scowl for hours and the well worn paths that paired with her usual smile were masked. Her focus was the only thing keeping her afloat. She hadn't been silent like Shauna, but she'd been plenty quiet.

Taissa took a deep breath. She lowered her voice, though it was futile with both of them mere feet from her. There was no shielding Shauna or Van from this. "I'm just going to come out and say it. Jackie's gone now, too."

"She wha—"

"This fucking group said that they actually wanted her, so she… traded herself. For Callie. Secretly." Tai glanced at Lottie and Misty, sitting in the back row like naughty children, avoiding her eyes. Natalie had taken their phones away, sticking them in the seat pocket in front of her. 'We're almost there and we have a decent idea of where they are.' A fucking grand overstatement, but Jeff didn't need to know that. "And they've said they'll send Callie out so… hopefully she ends up at the trailhead you're going to. It's the best guess we have."

"Fuck," Jeff muttered. His voice was choked. "How's—" he cleared his throat, "how's Shauna doing?"

"Just… don't worry about that right now," Tai said quickly. "I've got her. The ritual shit they're planning isn't until New Year's Eve, so we have time to fix this. Focus on the girls, they should be there already when you get there. I sent you their numbers. We're about to lose service. No cops, Jeff."

"No cops," he repeated, a little dazed. "Got it. When should I worry? I mean… when should I think about coming in—"

"Do not come in after us," Tai insisted. "You won't need to. We've got it."

9:12 pm

"Fuck," Nat breathed. "We're really doing this thing."

They stood around the van, their backpacks on and flashlights out. Misty had checked and double checked everything—their supplies, their map, the information about the collective that she'd scribbled onto scraps of paper before they'd lost service. Guns sat slung over their shoulders or at their hips. Knives in their pockets. A machete in a sheath hung at Shauna's waist, a matching one on Tai's. Their reasons were different, but drawing blood and clearing brush were both things that they needed to be ready for.

“Yeah,” Taissa mumbled. “We really fucking are.” She kept a hand on Shauna’s forearm out of habit. She’d been reaching for her every few seconds, touching her again after every adjustment of their gear or clothing.

“Is everybody ready?” Misty’s tone carried a smile that none of the others wore.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Van muttered.

Lottie closed her eyes. She took a deep breath and opened herself up. She hadn’t in a long time. Not all the way. Not without meds to dim the noise or learned barriers in place. “Ready.” When she opened her eyes, the colors were brighter—illuminated not just by their flashlights or the moon overhead. Sounds were louder—clearer and carried to her from further away.

She took a step forward, but Shauna caught her wrist. “Wait.” The first word she’d spoken since the rest stop, her voice high and soft. Her face flickered in the beam of Misty’s flashlight. Her teenage self fighting to surface—younger, softer features pushing to the front in brief glimpses. Tai’s eyes widened for less than a second, but Lottie caught it just the same. Tai blinked hard, shaking her head to clear it—always resisting. “I think…” Shauna trailed off and looked at the ground.

Lottie slipped her hand into Shauna’s and squeezed. “Hmm?” she encouraged her softly. Natalie’s eyes were heavy on them. Tense. Waiting.

Shauna closed her eyes. Embarrassment coursed through her—a different kind of fear than the one she’d been smothered by since Callie’d been taken. Lottie could feel it, buzzing and pulsing against her skin. It would be excitement, if Shauna had Jackie by her side right now. Shauna dropped her hand and fished a small knife out of her picket, flipping it open. Without looking up, without meeting the eyes on her, Shauna dragged the tip of the blade across the meat of her palm carefully. A shallow cut. Less than an inch and just deep enough for a few drops of blood to spill onto the dirt at their feet when she twisted her hand sideways to let it run.

“Fucking hell,” Taissa murmured.

A collective breath was released.

Lottie held her hand out and Shauna passed her the knife. She mimicked her motions exactly, squeezing once she’d made the cut to allow more blood to fall. Lottie handed the blade to Van. She took it. Sighed with her entire body. Glanced at Taissa. Etched a line into her skin. From Van to Misty, palpable excitement radiating off of her. From Misty to Natalie, a grimace and a curse under her breath as she made her cut.

Nat held the knife out to Taissa, who paused. Stared at each of them in turn. Looked back at Nat’s bleeding hand. “This,” she plucked the blade out of Natalie’s open palm, ‘is so,’ dug it into her skin gently, “fucking unsanitary.” Tai shook her hand twice, letting some blood hit the ground, then wiped the rest away on her pants.

Shauna took it back, folding it carefully and slipping it into her front pocket. “Ready.”

10:14 pm

“I think we’re far enough in. The car won’t lead straight to us anymore if someone happens to see it.” Misty stopped abruptly and turned back to look at the other women. “We should set up camp here.”

“Camp?” Van asked incredulously. Misty shined her flashlight on her and she raised a hand to cover her eyes. “This isn’t a fucking backpacking trip Misty, were not hanging out around a campfire and… and telling fucking stories.”

Nat sighed heavily, clapping Van on the shoulder. “She’s right. We can’t hike straight through the night. We have no fucking clue where we’re going. No light, no tracks, no trails. It’s a fucking bust in the dark like this. And we have four days to—”

“We think,” Van corrected harshly, shrugging Nat’s hand off. “We think we have four days. All we know is that they have them right now.”

“They care about the symbolism,” Lottie said softly, slipping her backpack off of her shoulders and letting it fall heavily to the ground. “The symbolism they’ve come up with, that is. They won’t do it early.”

This group had set their own rules. It was odd, from what Misty had read of their messages. An amalgamation of truths gleaned from Shauna’s journals and inferences that had almost no basis. When they’d been out there, they’d never cared about dates. Time was a skewed concept then, even beyond not having access to a paper calendar, let alone something like the Google Calendar that this 2525 Collective kept. They had stories, of course. Mythologies that infiltrated Van’s movie retellings until it was only their own narratives that they heard recounted around the fire. They had some idea of how it all worked, but they were young and starving and high. Incomplete brain development, stunted further by malnutrition and hallucinogenic drugs. Misty understood all that now. They did things because they were exhilarating. Like cutting their hands and letting blood hit the earth—it was ritual for certain and luck in theory, and there wasn’t much to it beyond that. But these people had written entire sagas on their every move.

The human condition was fascinating. Hopefully, Misty could keep some of them after this. Interview them and learn more about what had drawn them to this lifestyle.

“I’m exhausted,” Taissa offered quietly. A huge admission, coming from her. She looked it, but hearing her say it made everyone do a double take. “And Nat’s right. It’s a waste of energy to try anything tonight.”

“I can take first watch!” Misty offered.

“I’ll watch with you,” Nat said immediately.

Van begrudgingly accepted, eyeing Taissa wearily. Shauna silently laid her sleeping bag out. It was their consent that was needed to stop moving, and technically they’d given it. Everyone moved quickly after that, slotting into place.

Van muttered to Taissa, quiet enough that Misty couldn’t hear her words, and Tai gave a quick nod. Van pulled a thin climbing rope out of her side pocket. They sat next to each other, their bags perpendicular to Shauna’s at her feet, and Tai held her left hand out for Van to bind it to her right. Nat eyed the bundle of leftover rope, glancing between it and Shauna a few times. She must’ve decided against it, because she set herself up on Shauna’s right side,

cross-legged with her rifle in hand. Lottie fell in on Shauna's left immediately, pressing her body close to hers. Shauna didn't react. She didn't close eyes. She just stared at the sky and took deep, shaky breaths. Misty sat near her head, closing the triangle around her.

It felt good to be the one to complete the formation. Misty was the last puzzle piece, falling into place.

10:55 pm

Jeff's GPS spat him out at the trailhead. A single car sat in the parking lot. He rolled slowly over the gravel, pulling up a few spots away. Van had told these girls what kind of car to expect and when, but it was dark. He didn't want to spook them by getting too close, too fast. He put the car in park and pulled up his messages, double checking their names and the photo Jackie had sent of them. Because that was a thing that happened now.

Jackie Taylor texted him.

The idea of Jackie having a cell phone burrowed under his skin and lodged itself there. Unnatural, like she'd time traveled here from the nineties to get one. She still didn't really exist to him in the present. He'd seen her in person. He knew that she'd aged the same as the rest of them. Her style had changed. Her voice had deepened. But she was the same in all the ways that counted—as pretty and as bitchy as ever.

Jackie Taylor had wriggled her way out of the past and she'd gotten her hands on a goddamn cell phone. She'd gotten her hands on his wife, too. She texted Jeff things like "Shauna says—" or "Shauna and I are going to—" and her name was saved in his phone—even though he probably should've used a pseudonym—and it'd popped up on his screen over a dozen times now.

Jackie Taylor.

She texted Callie, too. Jeff had seen it once, glancing over Callie's shoulder in case the messages were from Shauna.

I can't tell you much but we are okay. I will have your mom call you! We are fine sweetie xoxo

Of course Jackie had taken fucking minutes to cement herself in their lives. Jeff had been so busy worrying about fucking divorce proceedings and custody battles and co-parenting with Jackie fucking Taylor, lovable step-mom extraordinaire that he hadn't registered just how dangerous the mess those women had gotten themselves into was. And now Callie was gone. He'd fucking failed his own daughter. And Jackie Taylor was on her way to save her.

Because of course she was.

11:12 pm

"Jackie?" Callie asked quietly.

She'd been studying the shed, her eyes darting around the same four walls for a long fucking time. When they'd put them in there, Jackie had seemed truly phased for the first time. It was small. Callie wasn't even sure that there'd be enough room for them to stretch all the way out if they laid down. But there were sleeping bags and pillows and blankets stacked inside and a lantern fixed on the wall and she figured it was nicer than sleeping in the dark and the dirt. The fucking off-brand kidnappers sat outside, surrounding them. They'd locked them in and they'd notice the second they tried to bust their way out.

Jackie had seemed so cool and collected up until that point. She'd even told one of them to fuck off when he'd said that they weren't allowed to hug. She'd talked over the plan for getting Callie out the next day, hammering through the details over and over. She'd convinced them to untie their hands as they slept, asking them how the hell they thought they'd get out, anyway. And those freaks with guns had just sort of… listened to her.

But once they'd stepped inside and the door had shut behind them, Jackie had started to visibly freak a little. Not as bad as Callie's mom or anything, but… it wasn't exactly comforting.

"Jackie?" Callie repeated. Jackie snapped her face around to her, raising her brows gently. "Is it… safe to sleep, do you think?"

That wasn't really what Callie had wanted to ask. She'd wanted to ask Jackie if she was okay, but the words had twisted into something safer as they left her lips.

"Oh," Jackie breathed. 'I think so, honey.' Her voice trembled slightly. She sat up on her knees and started shuffling things around. "Here, let me get these blankets situated for you to —"

Callie grabbed her arm without thinking. Jackie froze and stared back at her. Her face was so kind and open it made Callie feel dizzy.

"I'm scared."

The admission came without Callie planning it, followed by the tears she'd held in since this whole bullshit day had started, when two assholes covered her mouth and snatched her out of her bed. She missed Ilana so much it hurt. And… she missed her fucking mom, as annoying as that was.

"Okay," Jackie said gently. It was a different okay than the kinds her parents gave—there was no dismissal or I'm pretending to care because I have to quality to it. "Okay, let's sit up and talk for a while, hmm?" Jackie scooted to the wall that Callie was leaning against and held her arms open.

Callie blinked at her for a second, unsure what to do or what was normal in this situation. She hadn't known how to act with Jackie. She didn't know her at all, really. But her entire life had been so centered around her, that Callie couldn't help but feel like she did. The tears turned into sobs and snot plugged her nose and she was going to have such a bad headache from this and all of that made her not give a fuck about what was correct anymore. Callie wrapped her arms around Jackie's middle and wailed into her shoulder. Jackie rubbed her back in big, wide circles, just like her mom used to sometimes when she was little and didn't feel good.

“Do you think they’re gonna… do something to us in here?” Callie blurted out, hiccupping with the force of her cries.

“What?” Jackie squeezed her closer for a moment. “What makes you say that, sweetie? I think they’re being honest about the plan. I think we’re all just going to bed until it’s light out.”

“You seemed scared. When we came in here. Just—” Callie tensed, ready for Jackie to argue. She just rubbed her back again. “For the first time you seemed… scared.”

“Oh, no. Callie, I’m… well, I was scared. I’m claustrophobic. That’s all,” Jackie explained gently. “And I should’ve just told you that. I thought I was hiding it better than I actually was, clearly. I’m sorry I scared you.”

Callie sniffed loudly, cringing at the sheer amount of snot she’d probably rubbed into Jackie’s coat, and pulled back to look at her. She was so fucking nice. She hadn’t even done anything wrong, really. Technically, she was sacrificing her fucking life for her—Callie had heard the idiot kidnappers discussing it in the car. And she was apologizing to Callie. It didn’t make sense, Jackie and her mom being together.

“It’s okay.” Callie rubbed her eyes to clear them. “I’m sorry you’re stuck in this shitty-ass tiny home.”

Jackie giggled and her whole face lit up with a smile. Laughing, when she’d walked in this fucking bullshit place to die.

“How are you so okay right now?” Callie mumbled. “I don’t—you’re just—they’re gonna —” She worked herself up into tears again.

Jackie gave her a sympathetic look. She took a pillow and held it against the wall behind them, then she beckoned Callie closer. Callie leaned in and Jackie whispered in her ear, low enough that she could barely hear her, let alone the freaks outside. “Your mom is coming. They’re gonna get me out, we just wanted you safe first. It’s gonna be okay, but we can’t talk about it.”

Callie wasn’t sure if she believed it or not. She couldn’t imagine a world where her mom would trade Jackie for her. She’d picked Jackie over her for ages, even when she was just a figment of her fucking imagination. She’d left her with her dad for weeks to go off with Jackie and Jackie had been the one to let Callie know that they were okay. The one to check on her.

“You swear?” Callie whispered back.

Jackie smiled softly and set the pillow on the ground. She held her pinky up. Callie blinked back tears as she hooked her own through it. Jackie nodded.

Jackie was so easy to believe that Callie let herself.

December 28th, 2021

7:08 am

“So… northeast, then?”

Nat blinked at the map that Misty held in front of her. Tai was on Misty’s other side, staring over her shoulder. Misty’s curls were limp from sleeping in the elements. They kept brushing against Taissa’s face, causing Tai to tilt her head to the side repeatedly like a tick.

Van finished cinching her gear and stacked it against the log where everyone else’s was lined up. Lottie sat there, her ankles crossed and her face turned up toward the newly risen run. She looked serene in a way that had once comforted Van, but right now it was pissing her off. Shauna was stretching her neck from side-to-side. She hadn’t slept, but she hadn’t taken a watch, either. She’d simply existed and Van knew that’d taken more than enough out of her. She, Nat, and Van were the ones who’d stayed awake the entire night. Taissa had crashed, thank God, more passing out than sleeping. She’d finally allowed Van to bind their wrists together. Being out here had put her back into a frame of mind where things like that were okay. (The rules of normality never fucking applied to any of them, no matter where they were, but Taissa loved to pretend that they could, if she just tried hard enough.)

Under different circumstances, Van might’ve actually slept. Having Tai bound to her could’ve brought her enough comfort to close her eyes and relax. But things were royally fucked even beyond their usual, so Van had felt the weight of Taissa against her and repositioned her head when she coughed to help her breathe through her lingering illness—the same illness that Jackie had just pulled through, before wandering off and letting herself get taken—and meanwhile she’d watched the rest of the women. Misty, to ensure that she didn’t pull any crazy shit. Nat, to ensure that she didn’t pull any hero shit. Lottie, to ensure that she didn’t start any wild shit. And Shauna, to ensure that she didn’t fucking die on them through sheer force of will.

Jackie would never forgive Van if she let Shauna Shipman get hurt. She’d pretend like she did. She’d feign understanding and she’d promise that she loved her just the same, but Van would know. Her lies around Shauna were already a gaping wound between them that would take ages to heal and would probably still come out looking like the ones across her face or across Jackie’s chest, never fully fading. So Van had watched Shauna the hardest, because she was just as deeply prone to madness as Lottie was, but hers wasn’t disruptive or showy most of the time. It didn’t draw attention to itself, flashing warning lights and waving red flags. She wasn’t the girl standing in front of the class, spouting off manic theories that got the other kids worked up and unruly. She was the girl who quietly slipped to the back corner when no one was looking and smothered the fucking class pet.

Van had spent a lot of the night thinking about Shauna, because she couldn’t think about Jackie without bile rising in her throat and her heart pounding in her ears and her legs itching to run. Besides, Jackie would’ve insisted that she wanted her to be thinking about Shauna right now, anyway.

“I’m pretty sure. That’s the quickest way to the lake itself and, since we don’t really know where they’re stationed near it, that seems like the best option.” Misty nodded. She started walking through the dense brush to their left, her compass held out in front of her. “I think there’s a bit of a beaten path up ahead. It looks clearer up there, but I’ll just make sure it’s the right direct—”

“Fuck!”

It happened so fast Van didn't see it. She'd been glancing at Lottie, wondering when to prod her out of her spiritual stupor. When she snapped her head up at Nat's scream, a very different scene was laid out in front of her.

Misty was a few yards ahead of them. A man held her from behind, a knife to her throat and his arms wrapped tight around her, pinning her own to her sides. Nat's rifle was already raised, pointed square at his head, as was Tai's pistol. Van and Shauna both drew their own guns. Lottie remained seated, watching with casual interest.

"Put the guns down!" the man yelled. Spittle flew from his lips. He was around their age, older than Van had expected for this group. He wore normal hiking clothes, rather than the bizarre gray sweatsuit, but the sigil hung around his neck.

"Nathan?" a woman's voice called. There was rustling, followed by two women appearing suddenly behind Misty and the man. The women were armed, pointing back at all of them. Some kind of bullshit wild west standoff.

"Oh my God," one of the women gasped. She was young. Dirty blonde hair and freckles across her cheeks. Closer to what Van had expected—her eyes wide with something akin to intense religious fervor. "It's… it's them. Did we know that they were—"

"Shut up!" the other woman snapped. She was older, closer to thirty, her hair dark and piled into a bun on top of her head. She was trying to look certain, her jaw set tight, but her aim kept wandering, landing on each of them in turn.

Van didn't see a way to shoot without opening themselves up to immediate fire. None of them were that great of shots aside from Nat. Nat started tip-toeing toward the man slowly—prey that she was trying not to spook.

"Stop moving!" he screamed. Nat froze in place. 'Put… put the guns down.' He jerked his chin toward the ground sharply. He sounded deeply unsure of himself, leaning on anger to cover it the way men often did. Amateurish. They were surprised. They hadn't been carefully stalking them, they'd fucking happened upon them. "Or I'll kill her!"

Misty squeaked as he tightened his grip and readjusted the blade against her throat.

"It's them. We can't kill—"

"Shut up, Lacey!" the older woman repeated.

"Why don't we all put the guns down," Tai said coolly, "and have a conversation?"

"No! Guns down, now!" All of them knew what someone looked like when they weren't bluffing, and this man wasn't. Nat and Taissa slowly lowered their weapons, setting them on the dirt in front of them. 'Lacey, pick them up!' The young girl shuffled forward and picked them up, clicking the safeties on and setting them a few feet behind her. "You two, also!" Nathan nodded at Shauna and Van.

Van looked at Shauna. Shauna was staring back, her pistol held steady in both hands. Van didn't lower her rifle.

"Now!" Nathan yelled. A miniscule bead of blood trickled down the center of Misty's throat. "Three seconds or she's dead!"

“Guys!” Nat snapped.

Taissa stared at Van with a glimmer of hope—hoping that she had a plan, no doubt. She didn’t. She couldn’t think quick enough. The young girl was their weakness, that much was clear. Lacey, the other woman had called her. She had some sort of reverence for them, but they couldn’t sweet talk her in the moments they had before this escalated to uncontrollable violence.

So, no. Van didn’t have a plan. She simply had a complete fucking lack of desire to lay down her weapons for Misty, when Jackie’s life was on the line.

Fuck.

“One!”

Van and Shauna grimaced at each other, holding steady.

“Van!” Nat shrieked incredulously. “Shauna!”

“I’m thinking!” Shauna whined. She looked and sounded the most herself Van had seen since Callie was taken. She was bouncing her heel impatiently, her face pinched with concern.

“Thinking?” Natalie demanded. “Oh my God!”

“We don’t need a shoot-out,” Tai said carefully. “Just—”

“Two!”

“Put it on me!” Nat stepped toward the cultist assholes. “Put the knife on me. Or a gun. Whatever.”

“Wha—” Nathan looked at her dumbfounded.

“Natalie!” Shauna’s tone was pure exasperation.

“They’re gonna shoot you, dumbass!” Nat snapped impatiently. “Put the threat on me instead.”

Nat turned her back to them, her hands in the air. The older woman stepped forward, holding the gun to the back of her head and staring at the other women in confusion. “Fucking cunts,” Nat muttered at Van and Shauna. “Unbelievable.”

God fucking damnit.

Van crouched to set her rifle down. Shauna followed suit, shooting Nat a death glare.

Lacey shot forward and snatched them, piling them with the others.

7:22 am

“And you understand what happens if you break a promise like this?” Jackie raised her eyebrows at the women. The two that had accompanied that asshole Callie had bit were going to be the ones to hike her close enough to the trailhead for her to make her way to Jeff.

(Jackie had insisted on it being the women and the women only.) “That there will be severe consequences?”

“Yes.”

“We understand.”

“Good. Go ahead.” Jackie nodded. The sigil was drawn in the dirt between them—Jackie had needed to glance at their necklaces for reference a few times as she’d done it—and the women squeezed blood from their pricked fingertips onto the center of it. Jackie did the same. “Okay, it’s sealed now.”

It was complete and utter bullshit, of course. Jackie had made it up on the spot, but these women didn’t know that. They seemed to think that she was some kind of witch with a mental spellbook and magical powers. So Jackie had taken advantage, insisting that they swear to get Callie out safely.

“Alright!” Morgan chimed quickly. “Time to get going.”

“Jackie.” Callie threw herself at her, winding her arms around her neck. Jackie caught her weight—they’d managed to avoid the wrist binding again that morning, with some careful reasoning on Jackie’s part—and held her close. “You can’t do this. You can’t—you—”

“Shhh,” Jackie hushed her gently. Tears pricked at the back of her eyes. Callie had finally curled into her side and passed out a few hours before sunrise. Jackie hadn’t slept, keeping careful vigil in case their fucking prison guards decided to try anything. She’d watched Callie, memorizing her face. Shauna’s daughter. Life had gone to fucking hell, but Jackie had gotten a chance to get to know Shauna’s daughter, and that wasn’t something that she took for granted. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

Callie sobbed and gasped in a breath. “No it isn’t. It isn’t okay.”

“We’ve got a long hike, time to break this—” James started impatiently.

“Five fucking minutes,” Jackie spat, tears spilling hot over her cheeks. ‘Have a shred of decency and give us five fucking mintues.’ He quieted. “It’ll be okay, Callie. I promise.”

“You don’t fucking get it!” Callie wailed and she sounded so like Shauna that it nearly stopped Jackie’s heart. “You don’t understand what’s gonna h-happen to me!”

Jackie pulled back and held Callie’s shoulders. She was beyond terrified, her face coated with tears and her lip trembling. “What do you mean, sweetie?”

“She doesn’t love me.” Callie sniffed, wiping her cheeks roughly. “My mom doesn’t—she doesn’t—doesn’t give a fuck about me. She’s always loved you more. My whole life, she’s loved you more and—”

“No, honey.” Jackie shook her head. Her throat felt swollen. She tried to swallow it down, but her voice broke. “No. She does. She loves you. She just—”

“You don’t understand!” Callie sobbed. “If I go back to her and you—and you—if I’m the reason you die, she’s gonna fucking hate me! I’d be better off staying here and just letting them—”

Jackie shook her head and forced Callie into a hug again, rubbing her back slowly. “Deep breaths. Just take deep breaths, okay?” Callie choked on her tears like Sadie had as a little girl, like Van did when she was mid-panic, like Shauna had ever since Jackie had come back to her. ‘You’re going to go and you’re going to be okay. No matter what happens with—with your mom, you have a full and beautiful life ahead of you, honey. I know she can be harsh but… there’s more to life, okay? What about your best friend, hmm? Ilana, right?’ Callie nodded slowly. “I know she misses you and she loves you and I bet you anything she’s worried sick right now.” Callie sobbed and squeezed Jackie tighter. “We don’t always end up with the best parents,” Jackie took a deep, shuddering breath, “but that doesn’t mean we can’t have good lives.”

A little part of Jackie felt like she was betraying Shauna, saying this shit. But Jackie knew. She knew that telling Callie that Shauna would be relieved that she was home safe, even if Jackie didn’t make it, was a fucking lie. Jackie understood now that Shauna would choose her every time, even over her own daughter. So Jackie had chosen Shauna’s daughter, because someone had to pick Callie.

“It’s time,” Morgan said quietly. “If you want her out, they have to leave now.”

Jackie took Callie’s cheeks between her hands and kissed her forehead gently. “I love you,” she said firmly. “Go, sweetie.”

As Jackie watched them walk away, Callie’s cries echoing off of the trees, she doubled down on her resolve. She was going to come out of this alive and she was going to spend the rest of her fucking days undoing the damage that her absence had done.

Callie was going to feel loved, come hell or highwater.

7:37 am

“If it was just one or two of them, we could take them with us,” the darker haired woman mused. “But we can’t incorporate all six of them.”

Like it was a last second goddamn dinner reservation, and she was the hostess, insisting that they wouldn’t be able to squeeze in seats for that many. Fucking freaks. Everything was curated for their big event, it seemed. They’d forced all six of them into a circle, sitting back to back. The man had fled almost immediately, carting off their guns and muttering about getting backup. The cult bitches had taken the machetes, tossing them into the brush a few yards away, but Tai was fairly certain that all of them had smaller knives concealed on their person that their less-than-qualified captors hadn’t thought to search for.

“But they’re the whole reason that we’re even—” the young girl—Lacey was her name—was practically whining. Begging. A kid in a fucking candy store.

“Enough!” the darker haired woman snapped—Mom saying no. “I’m thinking.”

“Lacey, come here a minute.” Lottie’s voice came from behind Taissa, light and breezy. Good fucking God. She hadn’t even moved when they’d come under fire. She’d just sat there like she was fucking meditating, not a care in the world. “I have a message for you, my love.”

Tai couldn't turn to watch them without setting off their other captor, so she focused on her face. Lottie was fucking unhinged, but she was astoundingly capable when she was at her best. Tai held her breath and prayed that Lottie was actually on her game now.

"Lacey! What're you—do not get closer to them!"

"But… I mean, Seline, they're the real thing."

"Yeah and they're dangerous." The woman—Seline—was afraid of them. Tai could sense it. The same energy she'd gotten from their rescuers out there, the doctors at the hospital, the FBI agents that'd questioned them. Palpable fear.

Lacey, on the other hand, was younger and dumber. So in awe that she was blissfully unafraid. "But—"

"Come here, sweetheart. Don't worry about Seline. She doesn't understand like you do," Lottie soothed. "Who's Maureen?"

"How—how did you know that?" Lacey sounded shocked, and a little teary. "I mean… can you—did you—"

"She's here with us," Lottie said confidently. "But I need you to come sit with me. Her words aren't clear. I need your energy to channel her."

There was a small rustle.

"Lacey!" Judging by the pure terror written on Seline's face and carried in her voice, that had been the sound of Lacey dropping her gun.

"Good girl," Lottie cooed. Seline ran around to the other side of the circle. Tai craned her neck to watch, the risk of moving seemingly mitigated by Seline's blatant distraction. She saw Lacey's face—young, bright, excited. She knelt in front of Lottie, her arms outstretched, disappearing into Lottie's lap. Lottie brought her hands up, clasping either side of Lacey's head and drawing her close, so that their foreheads touched. "There we go. She's stronger *now."*

Lottie just barely emphasized the word, but somehow they all snapped into motion. Shauna's right arm moved like lightning. She buried her knife—the same one they'd used to cut their hands at her bizarre fucking insistence—in Lacey's gut. The girl's eyes flickered with shock for half a second, before settling into that lifeless stare of impending death.

At the same time, Nat moved on Lottie's other side. She lunged for Seline, knocking her backwards. Misty, Tai, and Van were on their feet in seconds. Nat held Seline by the waist, her body weight pinning her legs down, but Seline was stretching to reach the gun that'd been knocked out of her hand. Van threw herself to the ground, fighting to force Seline's arms to her sides.

Tai snatched the gun up, aiming it at Seline's head. "Stop fighting," she snapped.

Shauna helped Lottie shift Lacey's body off of her. They pushed her over like a rag doll. Her back hit the ground, her knees bent under her body unnaturally. There was a gash through the midline of her torso—at least six inches. Shauna's must've dragged the knife through her after she'd sunk it in. Tai shuddered, then told herself that it was a mercy, shortening the girls suffering.

Misty was shuffling through her bag already. “Alright!” she called cheerily. She stood up straight, waving a bundle of rope over her head. “We need some answers, so don’t shoot her just yet!”

7:49 am

“Okay.” Van stood, brushing her hands on her pants. “She’s… uh… ready, I guess.” Van’s face was pale and twisted into a grimace. She eyed the rest of them wearily.

Seline, the dumb fucking bitch who’d stopped looking at the people she was holding at gunpoint, was tied to a tree trunk. Her arms were bound behind her and her torso was crossed in rope. Her legs were kicked out in front of her. She was steely silence, her face screwed up in concentration.

Nat didn’t mean to do it. She tried to fight the impulse. But it must’ve been muscle memory or some shit, because she couldn’t help but twist her face to the woman that they were all staring at, the same way they’d done when they’d heard that teeth needed pulling.

Shauna didn’t look annoyed or disgruntled this time. She wasn’t even looking back at any of them. She was tying her hair into a low bun, the knife she’d ripped back out of the younger woman’s body held between her teeth by the hilt.

Fucking hell.

Nat’s stomach twisted. “Seline, right?” she asked quickly, locking eyes with her. She nodded. “You should just tell us where they’re keeping her. Tell us right now and…” Nat glanced at Shauna. She was dumping water out of a blue Nalgene onto the blade of her knife. “And it’ll be a hell of a lot better.”

“I won’t ruin it.” Seline shook her head stubbornly. “We worked too hard.”

“Yeah,” Van cleared her throat, stepping in next to Nat. A clean metallic sound rang out. Nat didn’t need to turn toward it to know that Shauna was sharpening the knife on a stone. ‘The thing about that is… well, you’re gonna tell us eventually. So… you might as well now, right? Save all of us the… trouble.’ Seline didn’t speak. She glared at Van. “Alright, fucking… suit yourself, I guess.” Van muttered.

She turned away, fussing with their packs. Nat knew that she wasn’t really doing anything. She just didn’t want to watch what was coming next. Tai stood beside her, chewing her lip and staring at Shauna. Lottie sat back down on the log, adjusting her scarf around her neck like this was a pitstop on their family fucking hike. Misty sat cross-legged, with the map and a pen in her lap. Captivated. Probably would’ve made popcorn to munch on as she watched, if she could’ve. Nat didn’t want to see it, but she couldn’t force herself to look away.

Shauna let the stone drop to her side with a dull thunk. She sighed as she stepped toward Seline, the sound of a disappointed mother. “You took things that don’t belong to you.” Her tone was stern, her pitch as high and sweet as ever. Fucking terrifying. “You made a lot of really bad choices. So now you’re gonna help fix them.”

“I won’t tell you.” Seline shook her head back and forth resolutely. Her long, dark bangs settled over her eyes. “I’m not afraid of death.”

Shauna chuckled and it was genuine. It sent a chill through Natalie's spine. Shauna squatted next to Seline, her elbows perched on her knees, turning the knife over in her hands. "Do you really think that death is the worst thing that can happen to a person?"

"I—I—"

"Oh, sweetie." Shauna pushed her bangs off of her forehead, like Nat had seen her do for Lottie countless times. 'For you? Today? Death is the light at the end of the tunnel.' Seline's jaw trembled. "Misty, hand me that map." Misty passed it to Shauna, her eyes lit up with excitement. "I want you to show me," Shauna shook the map out with one hand until it was flat, and held it up to Seline's face, "where exactly they're taking her."

"I can't even point," Seline's nose twitched. "You have my hands tied up."

"Is your vision decent?" Shauna asked, cocking her head to the side.

"My—what?"

"Your eyesight." Anger was starting to seep into Shauna's words. She kept that maddeningly steady volume she used, but the emotion was fucking clear as day. Shauna scooted backwards, holding the map up near Seline's feet. 'Can you see from there? You can point with your fo— "Seline's foot shot up, aiming straight for Shauna's chest. Nat and Misty both lurched forward, but Shauna caught her ankle and slammed her leg to the ground." Did you just try to kick me?' Shauna smiled incredulously. She knelt, one knee across both of Seline's shins, and sunk her weight down. "Oh, you're not a very quick study, are you?" Shauna looked up at the rest of them. "Do we need to move her eventually?"

"What do you—" Tai started.

"Does she need to be able to walk?" Shauna clarified.

"No, it's too hard to be mobile with conscious hostages," Misty answered, shoving her glasses up on her nose, her shoulders shrugging with the motion. "Too much unforeseen risk that you can't mitigate."

"Great." Shauna held the knife up and raised her eyebrows at Seline. "Last chance. Would you like to behave yourself and tell me where we're going?"

Seline grimaced and squeezed her eyes shut.

"No?" Shauna pouted. "Bummer." She pushed up Seline's leggings carefully.

Nat tracked the silver of the blade, unable to blink, as Shauna reached beneath Seline's ankles and drug it across both of her achielles, her arm working so hard it shook.

Seline screamed. Her sneaker-clad feet fell sideways in a way that shouldn't be possible. Misty shrugged her scarf off, shoving it into her mouth to muffle her cries. Blood pooled around her legs, staining the denim of Shauna's jeans.

"There." Shauna sat back on her heels, wiping her sleeve across her forehead. 'Less kicking,' she gestured at Seline with the blade and smiled, "more talking."

1:36 pm

"Holy shit."

They'd really fucking done it. They'd built a fucking replica of the cabin. Jackie's heart dropped into her stomach.

"You recognize it." Morgan's face was lit up with a genuine smile for the first time since Jackie had met her. "We got it right."

"It isn't exact," Andrew added, lifting his foot up to rest his boot on the first step to the porch, like he was about to stick a fucking flag in it and pose for a photo. "You'll see when we get inside. We made some adjustments. No windows in the bedroom, that's where you'll sleep until the New Year. But it's pretty close."

"Pretty cool, isn't it?" Andrew rubbed at his arm, blood seeping through the white bandage Morgan had fixed on it. "We were chosen to stay here with you. We helped build it. Only a few of the others even know where it is and the rest of the group won't be led in until the night of the ceremony."

"That," Jackie said evenly, "is just fascinating."

And you, Andrew, Jackie added in her head, are the dumbass who just told your hostage that she has three whole days to escape before any backup comes.

If this was their best and brightest, fucking these assholes up was going to be a breeze.

3:49 pm

It was more than a little awkward to sit in the backseat of some random-ass, middle-aged, straight, white man's car for hours on end, while he simultaneously panicked about his kidnapped daughter and tried to make small talk. It was even more awkward when Midori factored Sadie in, her perfect face twisted with worry and her annoyance palpable every time Jeff opened his fucking mouth. He even looked annoying, his face so unnaturally smooth it was like staring at a life size Ken doll—Midlife Crisis Limited Edition stamped on his packaging.

Midori was just about to suggest that she and Sadie make a food run when she saw it—a flash of movement behind the tree line. A girl—pale skin, dark hair, slightly unsteady on her feet. "Oh my God!" she gasped. 'Look—Jeff,' she smacked his shoulder and he sat up straight, "is that—"

"Callie." He barrelled out of the car, running toward her.

"Why is it just her?" Sadie had one foot out the door already. Midori snatched her forearm. "What? Why are you—"

"It could be a set-up," Midori said carefully. "Don't you think? Maybe we should wait until she's all the way here."

Sadie craned her neck, searching the rest of the treeline desperately. "Why is it just her?" Tears fell down her cheeks, flushed pink with worry. She hadn't cried yet. Not properly. "If

they saved her, where the fuck—"

"It's totally possible that she escaped on her own, Sades." Midori soothed, running a hand up and down her thigh gently. "They haven't been in there all that long. I bet you they hadn't found her yet and she managed to slip away."

Jeff and Callie met in the middle. He hugged her so hard her feet lifted off the ground.

"So how will they know?" Sadie cried. "How will they know to get out?"

"Well…" Midori wracked her brain. She always had an answer. Always. That was what she was good at. Give her a problem, no matter how emotionally-charged, and she could figure out the best thing to say. The way to address it. Not this time. This was the final exam in a 400-level course on insane shit and she'd missed half the lectures. "Let's figure that out together, yeah? Once things have… settled a little."

"Yeah." Sadie pushed her door open and Midori followed.

They were halfway to Jeff and Callie, when Callie wailed one of the worst possible fucking things that anyone could say in front of Sadie. "Dad," she sobbed, "they have Jackie. They took her."

Midori automatically caught Sadie around the waist, holding her in place.

"Callie, shhh," Jeff tried to hush her quickly. "Honey, it's—"

"She—she traded herself for me. They're gonna kill her."

Sadie screeched loud enough to draw their attention. Callie was confused by their presence—she had no way of knowing who the random women intruding on this reunion were. But Jeff's expression was all guilt. That bastard had known the entire fucking time, which meant that Van had known before they'd lost service and she'd kept it from Sadie.

"Where?" Sadie sobbed. She fought hard against Midori—throwing her upper body forward, trying to lift her feet off the ground. Midori held her so tight she worried she'd leave bruises. Callie was terrified, clinging to her dad's arm as she stared at them. "Where did they take her? Tell me—tell me—" Sadie choked on her words.

Midori's heart pounded in her chest. Sadie went completely limp. Midori guided her to her knees, hugging her from behind the entire way down.

"Who—" Callie hiccuped and stepped closer to them. "Who are—"

"Cal," Jeff put an arm around her shoulders and eyed Sadie wearily, "she's… she's Jackie's, um—" he looked at Midori for guidance. She opened her mouth, but Sadie was quicker.

"Daughter," she sobbed. "She's my—she's my—I'm her daughter."

Midori had never heard Sadie say it in quite such simple terms. It was always she's my extra mom or I'm her accidental step-daughter once removed. They joked around it, struggled to describe it in uncomplicated terms. But there was no doubt in Midori's mind that the word was correct, because the perfect, brillant, beautiful girl falling apart in her arms could only be described as a daughter mourning a mother.

Callie shrugged Jeff's arm off and closed the distance between them. She swallowed, her throat bobbing. Her hands shook as she lowered herself to the ground, sitting cross-legged in front of Sadie. "My mom's… my mom's out there, too and—" Sadie sobbed and Callie's eyes flicked up to Midori's. She tried to look sympathetic, encouraging. Fuck, she didn't know what she was supposed to do with this kid on top of Sadie and the anxiety clawing at her own stomach for Jackie and Van and Lottie. Callie bit her lip and took Sadie's hand. "My mom is Shauna. Has Jackie mentioned—do you know about her?"

"Yeah." Sadie sniffed. "Yeah, of course. She's—of course I do." Midori loosened her grip around Sadie's middle, satisfied that she wasn't going to bolt just yet, and shifted her hands to her back.

"Well… Jackie told me that my mom is gonna find her. That she's following behind and—and that they'll be okay." Callie leaned forward, hugging Sadie tentatively. Sadie wrapped her arms around her, squeezing her back.

They both cried harder.

4:23 pm

"We don't know that she wasn't lying," Van snapped. "Can we just admit that?"

"She wasn't lying," Lottie chimed. She stepped over a stray log, hopping a bit in the process.

"How do you know?" Nat asked with genuine curiosity. "Is it the same way you knew about… Maureen?"

"Oh, that?" Lottie looped her arm through Nat's elbow. Nat stared at her, her brow arched in question. Shauna felt white hot jealousy simmering in her, fighting to boil over into pure fucking rage. 'No. I didn't channel anything. I read those emails Midori sent. They mentioned Lacey by name and her girlfriend Marueen who died last year, just before she went psycho.' Nat chuckled. "But I still know she wasn't lying. Midori had the same guess, the symbols are carved into the trees, and… yeah," she shrugged, "I have a feeling."

"All signs lead to the same road," Tai sighed. She stumbled over a root and Van caught her by the waist. Van's hand lingered on the small of her back. Shauna held her breath until her lungs burned. "Maps just aren't that fucking useful when there aren't any actual trails. That's the real issue."

"If we keep the same general direction, we'll get there just fine," Misty insisted. "And I've got a much better eye out for stray kidnappers, now! But sort of lucky we came across them, anyway. Peace of mind and extra confirmation that we're headed in the right direction never hurts."

"No," Nat snorted, clapping Misty on the back with the hand Lottie wasn't clinging to. "But try to avoid it next time."

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

Shauna had been successfully pushing images of Jackie out of her mind, fixated on saving her. But watching the other women touch each other like this brought it all to the forefront. Jackie sitting in her lap, playing with her hair. Jackie smiling at her from across the dining table. Jackie looking up at her from between her thighs. Jackie curled up against her chest. Jackie arching her back off the bed and screaming her name. Everything Shauna was missing.

Worse than that, interspersed in the flashes of memory like fucking bombs, was everything Shauna feared. Jackie cold and shivering with no shelter. Jackie with her arms pinned behind her back. Jackie being touched by these men the way that men had always tried to touch her. Jackie being hurt the way that Shauna had done hurt that morning.

She let out a noise—something between a yelp and a shriek. Tai was there first, a hand digging into her shoulder. Nat next, falling in at her other side. Van's hand found her back. Lottie and Misty stood in front of her.

"A quick break, I think," Tai said, pulling Shauna into a hug. "We need to eat something, anyway."

8:55 pm

"We've already pushed it enough," Misty argued. "We should camp here and keep going in the morning. Spending hours trekking in the dark when we can't be certain if we're even staying on track isn't doing us any favors."

"No," Van said simply. "You do what the fuck you want, Misty, but we're almost fucking there and I'm not stopping."

"We think we're almost there," Nat mumbled. "We've thought that for like… at least two hours now."

"Maybe it is a good idea to—"

"Taissa," Van begged. "Please, just—I'm not stopping, okay? I can't."

"I'm not either," Shauna agreed firmly.

Lottie tuned them out. The sounds of the woods at night overtook their voices—katydids and crickets chirping, rodents squeaking and skittering through the brush, wind whipping through the trees. Then the sound Lottie had been hoping for broke through. A voice, mellow and sweet. One she missed every single day.

One more hour, Laura Lee murmured in her ear, just keep moving for one more hour.

"One more hour," Lottie repeated, curving her lips around the words carefully. Savoring them. "Let's just keep moving for one more hour."

9:58 pm

"What I do know, is that I'm your main event," Jackie huffed, crossing her arms, "so you can't just kill me early because I piss you off."

“We’ve humored you for hours.” Andrew gestured at her with his pistol. “Get your ass up and get in the cabin. It’s late.”

They sat around a fire—one that Jackie had been stoking bigger and bigger for ages, sending as much light and smoke into the air as she could, so that if the other women did get close, they’d see it or smell it. Morgan and Andrew had their guns in hand. James laid on his back a few feet out of the smoke’s reach, with his hands behind his head, his pistol resting on his stomach.

“It’s time to sleep,” Morgan said calmly. “We can have another fire tomorr—”

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead,” Jackie said quietly. Morgan blinked at her. ‘Three days, right? You guys are gonna kill me in three fucking days?’ Jackie let the silence hang in the air. “Would you sleep?”

“I probably fucking would.”

“Andrew,” Morgan whispered, prodding him with her foot. “Let her be.”

Crack.

A gunshot rang out. Morgan fell forward, landing face first in the flames.

“What the—” Andrew raised his gun and spun around.

Crack.

Jackie threw herself sideways, laying flat on the ground, at the same time that Andrew’s body landed next to Morgan’s.

Please be them. Please be them. Please be—

“Jackie!” Shauna’s voice called.

Footsteps thudded.

No. No no no no no.

They hadn’t seen James, laying still and silent on the ground when they’d come across them. Jackie scrambled to him as quietly as she could. He raised his gun slowly, resting the hilt on his ribs. Jackie clawed at his wrist, twisting it toward the cabin and away from Shauna just as he fired.

He rolled, pinning her to the ground. She kept her grip on his wrist, holding tight with both hands and forcing the gun away from herself. She couldn’t see anything, his body blocking her view.

All the women’s voices rang out, growing closer with every pouding step.

“Jackie!”

“Natalie, shoot—”

“—can’t see shit!”

“She’ll hit Jackie if she—”

James collapsed on top of her, wheezing for air, his desperate inhales rattling in his chest. He'd stopped fighting her. She ripped the gun from his now loose grip and clicked the safety on, tossing it aside. As she pushed forward to throw him off, someone tugged him back. The weight lifted and he thudded to the ground next to her.

"Shauna," Jackie breathed.

10:01 pm

Shauna had found Jackie laying on the ground like this once before. She knelt at her side, just as she'd done then. The memory played in front of Shauna's eyes, a horror movie that she couldn't switch off. She could see Jackie as she was now, flat on her back with the wind knocked out of her, blinking up at her, but Shauna couldn't get a grasp on what was real and what wasn't.

Shauna's hands shook so hard it took two tries to take Jackie's cheeks between them.

Jackie reached up, holding her forearms. "Shauna," she repeated.

"Are you—J-Jackie—" Shauna gasped. "Are you—"

The smell of burning flesh hit her nose. She was vaguely aware of the sounds behind her. The shuffling of the other women pulling the bodies away from the fire. The click of a safety. Then Taissa's voice ringing out: "She's real, Shauna. She's there."

Shauna nodded. She choked on sobs. There was only one Jackie in front of her. Her skin pink—no tinge of blue cooling the tone. Real, warm, alive.

"Shauna," Jackie cried. She started to sit up. Shauna locked her hands behind her neck and pulled up, giving her the momentum she needed. Jackie ended up in Shauna's lap, straddling her thighs with her legs curled under her. Her shins barely skimmed the ground, nearly all of her weight on Shauna. Shauna leaned back to make room for her, held her in place with an arm anchored around the small of her back and a hand planted on the back of her head. Jackie held her tight around the neck, her nose pressed to Shauna's cheek. "She's okay. They let Callie go. They—"

"Jackie," Shauna sobbed, clinging to her, squeezing her so hard she squeaked in her ear, like something fragile. 'Jackie, you're—you—you can't ever do this again. Please,' she begged, desperate and needy. "Why would you—why—"

"I—I—" Jackie stammered. "I couldn't let Callie—"

"You broke my heart," Shauna whimpered. "Again. You fucking—you left me. You promised you wouldn't leave me and you left me."

"I'm sorry." Jackie slid her forehead against Shauna's. "I'm sorry. You're right, baby. You're right, I shouldn't have—"

"You're gonna kill me, Jackie." Shauna's breath hitched. "If you keep d-doing this to me, you're gonna fucking kill me. I've—I've been punished enough. I know what I did but it's—it's enough. I've f-fucking repented. I can't take anymore. Please, I can't—"

Jackie cut Shauna off with her lips, pressing firmly. They trembled against each other, both desperate for air, and she leaned back. Shauna caught her, both arms tight around her waist to stop her from sliding off of her lap. Jackie clung to her cheeks.

“This wasn’t punishment, Shauna. It wasn’t. It isn’t that, baby, please,” Jackie said firmly, searching her eyes. ‘It was about Callie. I didn’t do this to—to hurt you.’ Shauna’s nose ran, her eyes dumped tears down her cheeks, she coughed and choked on the fullness in her throat. She hadn’t cried like this since Misty had smashed a rock over her head and they’d dragged her inside, away from Jackie. “I love you.” Jackie wiped at her cheeks with her sleeve. “I love you, Shauna.”

“I lo—”

A hand on Shauna’s shoulder. It was going to tug her. It was going to yank her away from Jackie. They were going to take Jackie away, just like they’d done before. “No!” Shauna shrieked, sending her elbow flying backwards. Jackie’s eyes went wide. She pitched forward, wrapping Shauna in a hug that pinned her arms against her sides. Stopped her from fighting back. ‘You can’t,’ she gasped. Jackie’s face was aging down, turning blue, and she couldn’t do it, it was that all over again, the same dream, the same nightmare she’d been living for all these years. “You can’t take her! Don’t take her! Don’t—”

“I’m right here,” Jackie’s voice interrupted, soothing the ache in Shauna’s chest. Comfort and love and pain were wrapped up in her rasp, her breath warming Shauna’s ear, too warm to freeze. ‘I’m right here. It was just Nat, Shauna. We need to go inside, okay? Nobody’s taking me away. I’ve got you, baby. I’m right here. Can you hear me, Shauna?’ Jackie’s body was heavy against hers—chest to chest, cheek to cheek. Shauna nodded once. “Can you… hear anybody else right now, my love? Can you hear Natalie?”

Shauna shook her head and inhaled deep, slipping her hands under Jackie’s layers to feel for her spine.

10:43 pm

“And you’re absolutely certain that no one is coming here until New Year’s Eve?” Misty had questioned Jackie as if she were under investigation, the interrogation far outlasting any reasonable length of time. “Because if we’re going to stay here—”

“Jesus fucking Christ, she’s sure!” Van snapped. She couldn’t do this shit anymore. She’d been bolting all day, trying to get here, and now that they all might finally catch a collective breath, Misty wanted to go all Law & Order on their asses. Van was having none of it. She didn’t care if she sounded like a bitch. She was out.

A hand fell onto her knee. Tai, trying to soothe her. Van covered it and squeezed. “Sorry, just… I’m sure she’s fucking tired, Misty. We all are.”

“It’s okay,” Jackie said softly. She was in Shauna’s lap, curled against her and running a hand through her hair over and over. Shauna held her like a toy that she didn’t want to share—defensive if anyone got too close, more dog guarding resources than child on Christmas morning. (Jackie had hugged Van. Pressed kisses to her cheeks in apology. She’d hugged each of them—even Misty—but Shauna hadn’t let go of her hand the entire time.) ‘They told me

that only a few people know where the cabin is and that the rest wouldn't be led in until New Year's. Two women hiked Callie out, but I heard them say they'd wait with the others until the ceremony.' Jackie scrunched her nose in disgust at the word. Shauna planted her face in the crook of her neck. "I'm not sure if they know where this place is or not."

"Well, we already set noise traps. So it sounds like we barricade the fucking windows and we take watches and we figure out the rest of this shit in the morning," Nat said simply. 'Uh, maybe… maybe you two should take the proper bedroom?' Nat gestured at the tangle of Jackie and Shauna on the floor. "I know you didn't sleep, Shauna, and I doubt you did, Jackie?"

"No," Jackie confirmed quietly. "Is that okay with everyone?"

There was a grumble of agreement. Jackie hugged Van one more time, Shauna clinging to her arm, before she led Shauna to the bedroom.

10:47 pm

The second Shauna had the bedroom door shut behind them, something switched in her. There was fire. Anger. It didn't feel directed at Jackie. It felt… broader than that. Angry at the world. Laying in the street and screaming at the sky. Her hands and her face were scrubbed clean and bare, but her clothes bore evidence of her day—blood in various states of dryness, timestamps of violence by and against her since she'd entered the woods. Her nails dug into Jackie's wrist. She stared at her, almost unblinkingly. The past few weeks had been intense, but they'd been nothing compared to this.

"Shauna?" Jackie asked weakly. She should be on her knees. She should be begging for forgiveness. For understanding. But she couldn't make herself move. She was fixed in place, pinned there by Shauna's gaze. The muscles in her jaw clenched and unclenched as she took Jackie in. Her breathing was ragged—each inhale near-wheeze, each exhale choppy, multiple stops to push the air out. Jackie's legs trembled so hard her knees knocked together. "I'm—I'm sorry," she cried.

Tears blurred her vision first. Then movement.

Shauna was shoving her backwards, one hand still clinging to her wrist, the other digging into her hip. Jackie's feet carried her automatically. She stumbled but managed to keep up with the movement. Her ass hit the desk hard. Shauna pinned her there with her body, their hips aligned. Still the intense stare. The silence. The labored breathing.

"Shauna," Jackie whimpered. Not a question this time. Just her name. All she could say. She didn't know what she wanted from her, but all she could manage was her name. Shauna, Shauna, Shauna.

Shauna bobbed her head in a slow nod. Jackie sobbed, clutching Shauna's cheeks between her hands. She was terrified that Shauna would shove her away, but she didn't. She let Jackie hold her. Let her rest her forehead against hers. Let her cry against her. Jackie's heart thudded in her chest. Shauna swept the notebooks and pens that the cult freaks had left behind off the surface. They clattered to the floor.

“You guys alright?” Taissa called tentatively from the main room.

“Fine!” Shauna answered without missing a beat.

“Jack?” Van asked loudly.

Shauna pulled back to look at Jackie. Jackie gripped her cheeks harder, sniffing back the mucus collecting in her nose and her throat in an effort to sound slightly closer to convincingly okay. “Y-yes. Just knocked something over, sorry!”

“Alright…” Jackie could tell from Van’s tone that she didn’t buy it, but she wasn’t going to barge in.

Shauna surged forward and kissed Jackie and it was relief from head to fucking toe. Whatever this was, whatever Shauna was feeling, she wasn’t done with Jackie like that. They weren’t over. That was all that mattered. Jackie threw her arms around her neck, hugging her close. She pulled on her hair, tugged on her sweater, dug her fingers into her shoulder blade. She couldn’t draw Shauna close enough. Jackie tried to match Shauna’s pace, but her tongue was frantic. Every breath Jackie managed to draw in was a strained, gasping cry, but Shauna didn’t seem phased.

Her fingers found the button of Jackie’s jeans. Jackie pulled back to stare at her. The kiss had been heavy and desperate, but—

“Oh!” Jackie gasped. Shauna snapped her waist bands below her knees. Cold air hit her bare skin and burned. “Shauna. Shauna, slow down—”

Shauna lifted her onto the wooden desk and yanked her pants and underwear the rest of the way off.

Fuck.

The kiss had gotten Jackie going, but she wasn’t sure that she was physically ready for that. It’d been a fucking whirlwind of a day and the last thing she’d expected was Shauna wanting to fuck her right now. She should’ve expected it, really. It was Shauna. But her brain was clouded with thoughts of rescue missions and murders and—

Shauna locked her hands behind Jackie’s knees and tugged her forward until she was just barely perched on the edge of the desk.

“Shauna—”

Jackie wrapped her arms around her neck and her legs around her back, trying to hug her close again, but Shauna kept a few inches of distance between their bodies. She parted her lips slightly and Jackie held her breath, desperate for her to finally say something, but she just pushed her tongue against the roof of her mouth and spit into her hand and, in a split second, her fingers were buried deep inside of Jackie. Jackie’s clit throbbed sharply and she threw herself closer to Shauna, holding her tight and biting down on the crook of her neck to stifle her cry.

Jackie’s brain couldn’t keep up with her body. Shauna wrapped her free arm around her waist and held her, but she was thrusting into her so fast and so sudden and Jackie couldn’t stop crying and she couldn’t get a grip on what the fuck was going on.

She released Shauna's neck, leaving it pink and sticky with saliva, and pressed her forehead to her temple. "Wait," she choked out quietly. 'Wait, just— "Shauna's fingers stilled. Her breathing was still rapid, still shaky. Jackie rubbed her back, nudged her nose against her cheek, pressed a light kiss beneath her ear. Shauna squeezed her closer, tucking her chin on her shoulder. Her fingers curled up against Jackie's walls once. Slow. Gentle. Jackie felt her body react—a rush of wetness pooling between her thighs." S-slow like that,' Jackie whispered. "If you want me, you can—"

Shauna cut her off with a kiss. Jackie whimpered against her lips as she fucked her—measured, careful, precise—but when Jackie tried to part her lips, Shauna pulled away. Jackie sobbed again, the broken sound escaping her before she could swallow it down.

Shauna covered Jackie's clit with her palm, pressing against it with each movement of her fingers. Jackie hissed, her pulse thudding between her legs. "Yeah?" Shauna asked softly. The anger had left her. She looked at Jackie with sadness, interest, desire. Jackie's lip trembled. She nodded. 'Don't cry, baby,' Shauna murmured. "Why are you crying?"

"You—you—because you're so… upset with me."

"No." Shauna shook her head. 'No. Shhh, my pretty girl. Come here.' Shauna brought her body close again, pressing a kiss to Jackie's temple. Jackie hugged her tight, one hand splayed across her shoulder, the other cradling the back of her head. Shauna pulsed her fingers and Jackie felt herself clench around them. "You're dripping now, Jax." Shauna kept her voice low—Jackie had to strain to hear her over her own heartbeat. "I'm gonna fuck you harder." Shauna ramped everything up at once—her speed, her depth, the force she exerted on Jackie's clit. Jackie made guttural sounds in the back of her throat to cut off the moans building there. "I'm not upset with you."

"N-no?" Jackie breathed, struggling to maintain focus.

"No. You made a mistake. We fuck up sometimes." Shauna slipped her free hand under Jackie's sweatshirt. Her fingers were cold against Jackie's skin. "It's okay. It won't happen again."

Jackie shook her head. "No, of—oh—" she jerked her hips against Shauna's hand, pleasure shooting through her. "Of course not, baby. It was—"

"Shhh," Shauna hushed her forcefully. 'You listen to me. Can you do that? Can you be quiet for me?' Jackie nodded. Tears pricked the back of her eyes. She rocked slowly against Shauna's hand and put her teeth back over the marks she'd made in her skin, biting down. "Good girl." Jackie moaned, the sound muffled by her tongue where it lay trapped against the crook of Shauna's neck. "I was so scared before. I was trying to be… more normal about you. Let you have some space when you wanted it. Because I was terrified that I'd scare you off and you'd leave me."

Jackie had kept Shauna in this perpetual state of fucking panic—leaving after their fight with Jeff, leaving again for Callie. She was so used to it. Fleeing was her default. So to Jackie, this had been nothing. Jackie had been careful, so she thought, not to abandon Shauna without cause. But she'd underestimated what it would do to Shauna to leave her even for a few hours. To leave her, even for a very fucking good reason.

“I’m not worried about scaring you off anymore.” Shauna picked up the pace between Jackie’s legs and Jackie’s abdomen tightened. She grunted, saliva rolling down her chin. “Because you don’t get to choose now.”

Jackie froze—except for her thighs, which trembled around Shauna’s hand of their own accord, and her hips, which rocked with the force of Shauna’s thrusts alone. The desk creaked quietly, banging lightly against the wall in a slow, steady rhythm.

“You aren’t going anywhere. You aren’t even allowed out of my fucking sight until I say so. I don’t care whether you want that or not.” Jackie’s entire body shook. She cried with the force of it, pressing messy, desperate kisses against Shauna’s skin instead of sinking her teeth into it. “You belong to me. Do you understand what I’m saying to you right now, Jackie?”

“Yes,” Jackie gasped. She clawed at Shauna—her back, her cheek, her shoulder—and bucked her hips against her hand. “Yes, yes, yes, yes.”

Shauna kissed her and this time she let Jackie slide her tongue past her lips. Beautifully sloppy and insistent, but cut short when Shauna spoke again. “You’re gonna come for me—” Jackie nodded and whined, “—and then you’re gonna tell me what the rules are now.” Jackie had gone from unsure if she could get wet enough for what Shauna wanted, to unsure if she had ever been this wet in her entire fucking life. She nodded harder, her chin bobbing over and over, until Shauna stilled it with a hand buried in her hair. “Look at me.”

Jackie took one look at Shauna—her beautiful, focused, wild expression—and came so hard it hurt.

She fell over the edge with her mouth open in a silent scream—half-aware of the women in the next room, half stunned into quiet. Even more shocking than Shauna’s words, was her own reaction. Jackie wasn’t scared. It wasn’t too much. It didn’t overwhelm her or make her anxious to run. All Jackie had ever wanted was for Shauna to love her like this. Deeply, truly, madly. Consuming love. Sick love.

Her body shook with aftershocks long after her orgasm. Even her teeth chattered, clicking against each other as she calmed down. Shauna slipped her fingers out and Jackie groaned softly at the change in pressure. “I’m—” Jackie started to give Shauna what she’d asked for—more like demanded—but Shauna pushed her slick fingers into her mouth. Jackie closed her lips around them automatically.

“Think about your answer, baby,” Shauna urged. Jackie nodded, licking and sucking obediently, her own taste mixing with that of Shauna’s skin and spit. ‘Okay.’ Shauna drew her hand away and palmed Jackie’s cheek, sweeping her thumb back and forth. “Go ahead.”

“I don’t leave you,” Jackie whispered. She gripped Shauna’s wrist to hold her hand in place. ‘I don’t leave you ever again.’ Shauna nodded encouragingly. “I don’t go anywhere without you, until you tell me I can.”

“Good, baby,” Shauna sounded proud.

“I belong to you,” Jackie finished. Shauna smiled gently. It snapped something loose in Jackie. ‘I love you,’ she said quickly. “I love you so much. I want you. Just you. You won’t—you—promise you’ll always want me like this?”

“Oh, Jax. I love you.” Shauna kissed Jackie’s forehead, her cheeks, the bridge of her nose. Jackie cried, her shoulders shaking. “I don’t leave you, either. I’m not allowed to either. I belong to you, yeah?”

“Yes,” Jackie breathed out gratefully. “Yes.”

Jackie shivered and Shauna’s eyes narrowed with concern. She was an entirely different woman than she’d been just minutes ago. “You’re cold.” Shauna ran her hands up and down the sides of Jackie’s legs. ‘Let’s get you cleaned up.’ Jackie frowned a little, reaching for Shauna’s waistband. “No.” Shauna moved her hand away gently. “I just wanna hold you. I want you to sleep.”

Jackie felt her eyes droop immediately at the suggestion. Shauna chuckled, sweeping Jackie’s hair back, before dropping to her knees between her legs. She lapped at Jackie’s inner thighs and ran her tongue between them until she was clean—fuck, Jackie’s head spun—then she pulled a pair of thick sweatpants out of her backpack and rolled them on for Jackie, guiding her off of the desk when it was time to pull them over her hips.

Jackie wrapped her arms around Shauna’s waist, sinking into her. “We’re okay?”

“We’re okay,” Shauna said firmly. ‘Everything’s okay.’ Something about the way Shauna said it lulled Jackie into believing it with every fucking fiber of her being. Jackie breathed her in, humming as she massaged the base of her skull gently. “Bed?”

“Bed,” Jackie agreed.

Everything was going to be okay.

28. shades of blue

December 29th, 2021

“Shauna?”

Her eyes snapped open. She’d barely slept, jolting awake every time Jackie shifted or breathed a little louder. Jackie, for her part, had let Shauna guide her to the bed on wobbly legs, slid into her arms, and immediately slept. It made Shauna fucking giddy. She was feeling a million things, and most of them were passing through her so quickly she couldn’t even begin to examine them, but this sick joy had lingered throughout the night and into the morning—Jackie had let Shauna pick her up. Pull her close. Slip inside her. Make her cry. Make her come. She’d let Shauna take control of her body, then she’d let her demand even more.

Jackie hadn’t just agreed. She’d begged Shauna to promise her that she would always feel that way. She’d seen the darkest parts of Shauna and gripped them tighter between her fingers and relished in them, and then she’d curled up next to her and trusted her so completely, so wholly, to keep her safe. Her long lashes had fluttered shut, sealing tear-swollen eyes, and her breathing had slowed, parting kiss-swollen lips.

“Yeah?” Shauna whispered.

Jackie’s cheek slid against her chest as she pulled back. Shauna held her breath while she waited to meet her eyes. The issue—the thing making a dent in her sense of accomplishment—was that it was morning. The sun was up and the heavy spell that night had always cast on them had lifted. And with Jackie’s next words, Shauna was going to find out if she planned on addressing the things that Shauna had said as she’d slammed her fingers into her just to feel her muscles tighten around them.

Jackie propped herself up on her elbow, staring down at Shauna. Her lip was pulled between her teeth, her brow furrowed. Her entire face was just a touch swollen and the tip of her nose was pink with cold. Pink, not blue, Shauna repeated to herself. Whatever Jackie said next, she was pink rather than blue and that was what mattered.

“Hi,” Jackie said softly.

Hi.

This beautiful, infuriating, intoxicating woman of Shauna’s loved to simply say hi in a big moment, as if it could stand on its own.

“Hi, Jax,” Shauna raised a brow at her. She’d felt younger around Jackie—around all of the women, really—but she felt even more adolescent here. In the woods—not the woods, but these woods, and that was close enough—in the cabin, in this recreation of the last place they’d been girls together. Shauna felt impossibly young, so fear waned with the boldness of a child and a smirk pulled at her lips—hi back and I’m not playing this game and you go first.

Jackie smiled and scrunched her nose. “Maybe I’m being dumb. Maybe this is… God, maybe I’m just…” Her words trailed off into nothing, but her fingers started combing back Shauna’s hair.

“Well,” Shauna held her wrist loosely, “I can’t tell you if it’s dumb, if you don’t tell me what it is.”

Jackie giggled, artificially quiet to avoid disturbing the others. “Excuse you,” she reprimanded, “you’re supposed to say that nothing I could say would ever be dumb.”

“Mmm, I see how it is. Okay, no dumb questions.” Shauna slid her arm under the gap that Jackie had made by propping herself up, holding her waist. ‘What is it?’ Jackie blushed and squeezed her eyes shut. Shauna’s heart picked up speed. “Hey, baby,” she took a more serious tone, “what’s—”

“I have to pee,” Jackie blurted out quickly. ‘I… I have to pee and I wasn’t sure if I’m… allowed to, y’know, go without, um… asking you first. But now I’m thinking… maybe that was… well, was that just a sex thing?’ Jackie whispered the last words so low that Shauna had to read her lips. “And maybe it’s so… embarrassing of me to actually ask you if—”

Shauna pulled her closer and raised her head enough to press a kiss to her lips. Giving herself time to think of a response, because no, it hadn’t just been a sex thing. But they’d woken in this haze. Some blissful suspension of reality, smiling and joking instead of crying and worrying. Shauna didn’t want to smother it prematurely. She wanted to savor it. But Jackie also needed to understand that Shauna had meant every fucking word.

Shauna broke the kiss, pushing herself up to sit with her back against the wall. Jackie mimicked her movements. Shauna held her jaw, unable to force herself to stop touching her for even a moment. Her thumb swept back and forth across the skin near her lips.

“Did you think it was just a sex thing when I was saying it?” Shauna asked quietly. Jackie shook her head slowly. “Do you think it is now?”

“No?” Jackie whispered, more question than answer.

“No,” Shauna confirmed. Jackie moved closer suddenly, wrapping her arms around Shauna’s middle and burying her face in her chest. ‘It wasn’t.’ Shauna rubbed her back slowly. “How do you… feel about that?”

Jackie drew back just enough to look at her, pushing the hair out of her eyes and letting her fingers rest against Shauna’s cheek. “Like it makes sense.”

Shauna caught Jackie’s hand in her own, brought the back of it to her lips and kissed the skin there lightly. “Well, that’s logic, not emotion,” she corrected, waiting for a surprised smile to flash across Jackie’s face before slipping into one of her own. “Try again.”

“Okay, Miss I feel like I just wanna look at you,” Jackie shot back teasingly. “Glass houses, babe.”

“You know what?” Shauna dropped a kiss to Jackie’s forehead and she hummed appreciatively. “Fair.”

Jackie took Shauna’s cheeks between her hands, her eyes flashing dark. She licked her lips, a heavy moment passing between them.

“Excited,” she whispered, like she was telling her deepest darkest secret. “It… excites me.”

Shauna’s abdomen twitched with something hot and sharp and unexpected. She was slick between the thighs—had been since the night before, even though she had no fucking business being turned on while they were still in serious fucking danger. While she didn’t truly have confirmation that her daughter was safe. (Shauna had always found herself wet and wanting at times when other people, normal people, wouldn’t let sex cross their minds. Something was twisted and switched around in her. Wires crossed in her body and her brain that made her that way.)

“And… a little nervous,” Jackie added. “A little scared.”

“Of me?” Shauna asked evenly.

“No,” Jackie swallowed. She shifted her hands to Shauna’s shoulders. “Of being out of control. You’re the only person that I would… you’re just it, Shauna. You’re the only woman that could ever have me like this. If someone else talked to me like that, I’d fucking… well, it would make me fight. But you… it feels good. But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t scare me a little, feeling this way.”

“I love you,” Shauna said, awe washing over her. Disbelief that Jackie was here and alive and hers. Still. Again.

“I love you, too,” Jackie leaned in for a hug, winding her arms around Shauna’s neck. Shauna held her waist. “You’re turned on, aren’t you?” It was all curiosity, no judgment in Jackie’s tone.

Shauna blushed anyway. “I—well, I—”

“It’s okay,” Jackie soothed. ‘It… turns me on, too. Just… I figured you have been since last night?’ Jackie slipped a hand under the front of Shauna’s sweater, trailing it just above her waistband. “I could… take care of you real quick, if you—”

“You don’t have to do that, Jackie,” Shauna said firmly. She’d meant it all—she wasn’t going to let Jackie out of her sight. She would do whatever it took to keep Jackie by her side. But Shauna had gotten carried away with the way she’d touched her the night before. She didn’t want Jackie to think that she expected her to just fuck her whenever she wanted. “I’m not gonna force you to—”

“Force me?” Jackie interrupted. “I offered, baby. Nothing fancy, just… relief. I want to. Besides…” she leaned in closer, her lips brushing Shauna’s ear, “if I don’t make you come now, you’re gonna be snappy with everyone and you’re gonna look at me like you wanna pin me against a tree all day.”

“I’m probably still gonna look at you like that.”

Jackie giggled and pushed her hand lower. Shauna opened her hips just enough. Jackie’s fingers slid across her, easy and fast with how slick she was. It was quick and messy and to the point and Shauna whimpered in relief when she came undone, her nose buried in Jackie’s hair.

The relief went far beyond the physical. It was everything. Mental, emotional, fuck—it felt spiritual. From Shauna's point of view, Jackie may as well have risen from the dead. Shauna had paid her penance, and it'd been a rough one, but she'd been rewarded beyond anything she could've dreamed of.

Jackie hadn't made her wait. Hadn't made her grovel. Hadn't made her pretend to be someone that she wasn't. There were bumps in the road, but they were facing them together. Jackie knew her. She understood Shauna. She didn't care that she wanted sex at the wrong times or in the wrong places, that she was past the point of clinging and onto something much deeper than words could describe, that she needed her in this consuming explosive way. Shauna didn't have to pretend to be better or softer or more fucking normal.

Jackie wanted her, just as she was.

"Shauna?" Jackie ran a gentle finger up and down her hand. Her head was heavy on Shauna's shoulder and her body was warm against Shauna's.

Shauna pressed her lips to her forehead. "Hmm?"

"I still have to pee."

"Oh!" Shauna sat up taller. Jackie kept clinging to her. "Right, let's go."

"You're gonna take me?" Jackie asked incredulously.

"Of course I am. Nobody should go alone anyway right now, really."

"But…" Jackie sat up and blinked at her. "I'm not sure I'm gonna be able to pee in front of you."

"You used to pee in front of me all the time," Shauna chuckled. "You wouldn't pee in public without me."

"Well, yeah…" Jackie chewed her lip sweetly. "It's different now."

"Different?" Shauna raised her brows.

"Yeah, I mean," Jackie shrugged, "you go down there now."

Shauna laughed, pressing her lips together to stifle the noise of it. "So? I am aware that you still pee."

"Can't someone else come with me?"

"Jackie, please don't," Shauna begged. "Eventually, yes. But just… not right now, okay?"

"Well, eventually I'd like to take a piss all by myself," Jackie joked, stretching her arms above her head.

"We'll see," Shauna kissed her cheek quickly. "Let's go."

"So… what do we do now?" Natalie asked. She stretched her arm across her chest and tilted her head to the side. Her clothes were dirty but relatively bloodless, unlike Shauna's.

They hadn't brought many clothes, just a second set of everything and handfuls of underwear. They all knew what was actually important to have with you when you wandered into the wilderness. Shauna had Jackie's extra clothes shoved into her pack. Nat had carried her food and Van her water. Jackie had teared up when Shauna had handed over a fresh shirt and underwear. She knew that they wanted her. She knew intellectually that all these women had risked their lives for her, but seeing them literally carry her weight was… something else entirely.

"Well, we hike out right?" Tai said casually. "If we start in an hour, we can be out by tonight. We just, you know… watch for the fucking crazies on the way."

She stirred the instant oatmeal on the camp stove—that was something that would've been golden the first time around. Well, both things. Tiny packs of sugared oats and an actual camp stove with even heat for cooking. Jackie pried her eyes away from it. Focusing on any of it for too long was making her head spin. The cabin was too close to the one somewhere in the Canadian Rockies. The women were too close to the girls they'd once been.

Jackie shook her head slightly, knocking away the buzzing thoughts. Shauna's thumb slid back and forth soothingly above her hip bone. They sat with their backs to the wall, Shauna's arm around Jackie's waist. She had a feeling that Shauna might literally try to hold her hand the entire hike out, which was honestly what Jackie had craved so much as a girl. Hiking away from the site of the crash all those years ago, no promise of anything even waiting for them at the end of it. If Shauna had clung to her hand then, open and honest and afraid, Jackie thought that maybe everything would've gone differently.

"Misguided," Lottie muttered under her breath.

Tai set the spoon down and sat back on her heels, raising a brow. "What was that?"

"Nothing, just… well, I think they're misguided."

Tai scoffed. Shauna tensed. Jackie held her breath.

"Right, well," Nat said smoothly. "Whatever they are, they have a stupid amount of guns. And a fucking reckless lack of fear, which can work for and against us, depending on how they use it.

"We've got five guns now." Van rested a hand on Tai's shoulder and she sat back, crossing her legs beneath her and passing Van the spoon. Van clicked the stove off and started filling the bowls they'd snagged from the cabin's pantry recreation. "Courtesy of the two that tried to corral us on our way and the three rotting out front. Plus the two machetes, that's at least something for everyone."

"Corral you?" Jackie frowned. "What do you mean? You ran into some on the way here?"

Jackie had been so focused on Shauna, she hadn't even realized that they were missing the weapons they came in with. She hadn't even thought to ask what their day had been like or whether some of these cult members knew that there were more of them to reckon with than just Jackie.

"Uhh…" Van cleared her throat. "Yes. They sort of… snatched Misty and had us caught up there for a second, but it ended up being… fine. Clearly."

“Just fine,” Misty muttered under her breath, a bite in her tone that sent a chill through Jackie. “It was just absolutely fine.”

“So, they followed you in?” Jackie pushed forward. “Or what? I mean, what’re we dealing with here? Are they patrolling the area or something?”

“They’re way too disorganized to be considered a patrol,” Tai answered, passing Shauna and Jackie their breakfasts. “Bumbling around is more like it. They were just as surprised to see us, as we were to see them.”

“And they took your guns?” Jackie blew on her food to cool it. “So what, you had to run? Which means at least two of them know you’re here.”

“Mmm, sort of,” Nat held her hands up in a weighing the scales motion, leaning side to side as she moved them up and down. “We killed those two. But they had a dumbass with them and he knows we’re here, yeah. He took our guns and told them to watch us. Said he’d come back with help.”

“How’d you manage to—”

Shauna shook her head and scrunched her nose, resting a hand on Jackie’s thigh. Jackie quieted and forced down a bite of her oatmeal. Shauna had probably killed them, then. And she’d probably done it in a less than humane way. Jackie was a hypocrite. She knew that. She’d killed before. Everyone in the room had.

But Shauna’s propensity for violence was something that Jackie knew they were going to have to deal with down the line, once things had calmed down and the sort-of-necessary killing sprees were behind them. And God, if someone had told Jackie that she’d eventually be having this series of thoughts when they were seventeen, she would’ve laughed and rolled her eyes. But Shauna… Jackie looked at her, the curve of her features in profile—her beautiful, sweet face—and thought that if someone had told Shauna the same thing at the same time, she might not have been all that surprised.

“I don’t think leaving is the answer,” Lottie said firmly. She sat in one of the few chairs, her elbows on her knees and her hands clasped together. “I think we’re meant to see this through to the end.”

“I agree.” Van nodded slowly. “We can’t leave this open.”

“What exactly does see it through mean?” Tai asked carefully.

Shauna and Lottie spoke in tandem, their syllables paced equally but their words far different.

“Kill them.”

“Guide them.”

Fuck.

Jackie chewed her lip and watched Shauna’s face twist into incredulous disgust.

“Guide them?” Shauna spat. “Guide them, you’ve got to be fucking—”

Jackie took her hand and squeezed, so tight it probably hurt. Shauna's eyes flicked down to hers. She begged without words and Shauna fell silent.

"Okay, well," Van sighed. "In the most shocking turn of events yet, I'm actually on the same page as Shauna."

Jackie had been thinking about what their future would look like if they ran. What it would mean for them, what it would mean for their families. Hiding and worrying and wondering when the next shoe would drop. She hadn't liked the idea, but she hadn't yet let her mind wander into what not running actually meant. Apparently, Shauna and Van hadn't had an issue with connecting those dots.

"Kill them?" Nat was deadpan, her annoyance clear in the you've got to be shitting me expression on her face and the constant bounce in her foot. "You want us to kill all of these fucking people?"

"Pretty much," Van shrugged. "If you've got a better idea, I'm all ears. One that doesn't involve more running or kidnapped kids or Jackie martyring herself."

"We can't kill them all," Tai looked between Van and Shauna in disbelief. "This isn't a—a fucking kid pushed down the stairs or a house we can torch. This is an unknown amount of fucking zealots who we—" she waved around the room wildly, "are directly and easily linked to, strewn throughout a gigantic goddamn forest! So tell me you're fucking joking!"

"They're all coming here eventually," Van said coolly. "So it isn't like we can't track them down."

"Okay, fine." Tai swiped a hand over her mouth. Her wide eyes were locked on Van's. Van met her gaze, expressionless. "Fine. So we what? Shoot them from the trees or something? And then what? Let's pretend we can actually kill them all, what next? What do we do with dozens of fucking bodies?"

"Fucking shit, guys," Nat shook her head, her lips twisted in disgust. She climbed to her feet, pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace. "Some of them are… are fucking kids! They're brainwashed. They're sick! We can't just mow them down. You're already jumping to covering it up like killing them isn't even a fucking question!"

"It's not a question," Shauna said softly. So soft it shouldn't have caused everyone's attention to snap to her. But it did. She was calm. Certain. Jackie swallowed loudly. "We're killing them. We aren't letting them loose to fuck with us more. We're ending it."

"Because you're in charge, suddenly?" Nat laughed bitterly. "Jackie, don't you have any opinions on this shit?"

The room was tense. Everyone was pissed and exhausted and at each other's throats. Jackie had seen this play out before. Her body was reacting more than her mind, because logically, yeah. She thought that Van and Shauna were probably right. This wouldn't end unless they ended it. Callie and Sadie and Sammy had to be their priorities, and who was to say that these assholes wouldn't just start from scratch? But Jackie hated how casual they were being about it and she hated how angry everyone was and she hated the power plays and the threats and the bullshit. She wanted to say that. To make them discuss shit. Calmly. Hell,

to force them to line up and say one nice thing about everyone in the room and kiss and make up.

But it wasn't 1996. They weren't eighteen and innocent. And Jackie's heart was pounding in her ears and fear was shooting through her and the words tumbled out of her lips before she could stop them.

"Oh, I have plenty of fucking opinions. But it's below freezing out, so I'm good. I'm not playing that fucking game again."

Shauna's entire body froze. Jackie wasn't sure she was even breathing. A heavy silence blanketed the room. Guilty faces turned down to the floor.

Nat pursed her lips. "Okay—" she ran a hand through her hair, "well, I was the only one who wasn't there for that bullshit, so I feel like this is a little misdirected. But fair, I guess."

"Just… fuck," Jackie mumbled. Shauna looked like she'd been kicked. Her pretty eyes were wide and lips were turned down ever so slightly. Jackie pulled her hand into her own lap, winding both of her arms around Shauna's and hugging it to her body. "Fine. I—I understand where they're coming from. Our kids aren't safe while they're alive. It doesn't really matter how they ended up where they're at. They might be young or—or misguided, but they're dangerous. That's what matters."

"Exactly," Van agreed quickly. "It isn't ideal, but it is what it is. We're not gonna get them all together like this again. This is our shot."

Shauna exhaled slowly. Jackie squeezed her arm closer.

"Right." Tai stood and crossed the room, plucking her sweater from a hook by the door. 'Well, once again, you're all missing my fucking point.' She pulled the red wool over her head, tugging it down roughly. "I didn't say that I care about killing them, I said we can't cover that mess, even if we manage to pull it off. So we should… get out of here and hire someone to take care of them."

"Well, we could easily stage—" Misty tried to speak, but Lottie raised her voice and drowned her out.

"We just need to make them understand." She pushed herself to her feet slowly, looking at each of them in turn. "They can be guided to the right decision. They're lost. They're looking for meaning. We can set them on a nonviolent path. No murder or cover ups necessary."

"Princess," Nat sighed. "We're not the fucking people to teach nonviolent anything. That isn't gonna happen."

"But… I'm on your side." Lottie frowned. She was so clearly hurt. So clearly totally off of her meds. "I agree with you, Natalie. We shouldn't kill them."

"I don't think we should do anything with them," Nat clarified, swaying on her feet. Exhaustion was hitting her. There was no way she'd gotten any solid sleep since they traipsed into the woods. "We get out, we regroup, we figure something out. We don't kill them all or keep them as little… acolytes."

"We can't run forever," Van mumbled, her head in her hands. "We have families and jobs and businesses and fucking… lives to get back to."

“And we’re not getting back to them ever again if we end up in fucking prison,” Tai perched her hands on her hips, “which is where we’re going if we slaughter like fifty people!”

“Okay!” Jackie yelled.

Things were getting out of hand. Nat and Lottie were locked onto each other, as were Taissa and Van. It was too emotional. Everyone was too exhausted and frantic and set in their ways. Jackie pushed herself to her feet to get on their level. Shauna followed so swiftly it was as if they’d counted. One, two, three, go—jumping off the swings at the same time, skidding onto the bark chips.

“Can we just agree that we’re not in any condition to hike out today? The rest can wait, but I can tell some of you haven’t slept in days. And we can’t be fighting like this. We need to be able to rely on each other.”

“Seconded. We’re not prepared,” Misty sniffled, pushing her glasses up and crossing her arms against her chest. She sat perched on the arm of the chair that Lottie had vacated. “We’ve got at least forty-eight hours before they even start this way, so long as no one gets any ideas about us being here. It sounds reasonable to me to postpone a day.”

“But if they do realize we’re here, then we’re sitting fucking ducks!” Nat snapped. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I think they’re really guarded about this location,” Jackie offered quietly. Nat sucked air through her teeth, considering her. “I really don’t think that many people even know where it is. We might be even safer here than camping in the open.”

Nat scrubbed a hand over her face.

“One day,” Tai said firmly. “We can wait one day. Rest and plan and then get the fuck out of here.”

“We haven’t decided on anything, Taissa.” Shauna took a few steps toward her. Van, regardless of how on edge she was with Tai, stepped in front of her automatically. Shauna scoffed at her, rolling her eyes. “I’m just talking, Van. We actually fucking agree for once, can you stop acting like I’m some wild fucking animal?”

“Sure, when you stop being one,” Van shot back.

“Enough!” Jackie screamed.

She stepped between Van and Shauna, holding a hand out to each of them. Fucking sick of this game. Sick of all of it. All Jackie fucking wanted was to take Shauna home. Where home was, she had no clue. Not the house she’d shared with Jeff. Not the apartment that Jackie had told Rachel to keep, promising that she’d keep paying her portion of the rent as long as she needed. A new home. Somewhere that was theirs. No vacancy signs lit up in red or bellboys getting pushed down stairwells or Misty giving reddit lectures. Four walls, a roof, a decent bedroom for Callie, and a comfortable fucking bed for her and Shauna to fall into. That’s all that Jackie fucking wanted.

“Just—why don’t we take a break from each other?” Jackie pleaded. “This isn’t going anywhere.”

“If they don’t show promise, we can kill them.” Lottie spoke as though she’d never been interrupted, stepping into the center of the room. Everyone’s eyes fell on her, tracking the sweeping motions of her arms. “But we can make them think it’s still happening. They have reverence for us. They won’t just kill us. We’ll have time to assess.”

“Shut up, Lottie,” Shauna said through gritted teeth.

Nat groaned and threw her head back, staring at the ceiling. Van fell back, hovering near Taissa. Jackie softened, returning to Shauna’s side.

“We’ve got to lure them in somehow. Lull them. Whether we kill them or not. We’ve got to act as though we’re in on it, if we want to subdue them—”

“Lottie, just please wait—” Jackie tried halfheartedly.

“We can’t take them all by force. So we dress Jackie appropriately—”

“Shut the fuck up!” Shauna yelled, her voice breaking.

Jackie reached for her arm, but she turned away, her hands wrapped around her stomach. Jackie grazed the small of her back and she flinched.

The others tried to intercept, but their mumbles were overpowered by a renewed strength in Lottie’s voice.

“—and act as though we’re offering her to—”

“Shut up!” Shauna screamed. She pulled her hand out of her jacket and, before Jackie could even process what she was seeing, chaos broke out.

“Shauna!” Van jerked forward. Tai stopped her with an arm wrapped all the way around her waist.

“Fucking shit,” Nat muttered, her eyes wide.

Misty sighed heavily, crossing her legs and swinging her foot in little circles.

Lottie smiled faintly and Shauna clicked the safety off of the gun in her hand, aiming it straight at Lottie’s chest.

Jesus fucking Christ.

“You’re done, Lottie,” Shauna’s voice shook. Her hand trembled. But her expression was stone.

“Shauna, don’t.” Tai’s voice was barely above a whisper. Her eyes were saucer-wide, bouncing between Shauna’s face and the gun in her hand.

Jackie was rooted to the spot, a few feet to Shauna’s left. She couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move.

“Shipman,” Nat growled. She didn’t move, either. Didn’t even flinch. She stood a step behind Lottie, her eyes locked on Shauna’s hand. Assessing. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

“You know what,” Misty said calmly. “I’m honestly impressed we made it this long without this happening.”

“You could’ve used your words,” Lottie tilted her head to the side and clicked her tongue against her teeth. “This really isn’t necessary—”

“You’re gonna stop talking,” Shauna forced out. Her chest rose and fell roughly. “Because when you say crazy shit, sometimes people start to listen and I’m not doing this with you again. You are off your fucking meds and you’re losing it. We’re not back. We’re in fucking Maine. We’re a day’s hike from the real world. We’re not doing this.”

“I’m not doing anything, Shauna,” Lottie said softly. She shook her head and her soft dark waves slid against her cheeks. Jackie’s heart hammered. “It’s a conversation. It’s another perspective. You could try forgiveness for a change. Sometimes redemption is possible. We don’t always need to rely on revenge.”

Shauna laughed sharply. “We got back and you decided to act all… peace, love, forgiveness. Fucking… fucking herbalism bullshit. You burn your plants and you meditate and that’s really special, Lottie. Good for you.”

“We can do this without a fucking gun,” Nat said shakily. “Just put it—”

“Not me,” Shauna pushed forward. She hadn’t spared anyone but Lottie a glance. Her eyes were glassy with unshed tears. Jackie took half a step toward her, moving slowly, so that she didn’t draw any attention to herself. “I got angrier. I’ve been spitting fucking mad for twenty-five years and you’re the fucking reason that I lost her the first time and—and you were almost the reason I lost her a second time!”

“Shauna, baby, just—”

“I knew she’d be okay,” Lottie said simply, as though she was answering a casual question, rather than defending her divination to a madwoman with a fucking gun trained on her. Jackie really wished she’d just listen to Shauna’s initial request and shut the fuck up. “It was to save Callie.”

“I don’t give a fuck! I don’t care!” Shauna screeched. The tears broke free, pouring over her cheeks. Somehow, they only managed to make her look angrier. Jackie couldn’t stop looking at her—broken-hearted, driven to the brink, so clearly pained. Out of control. “You’ve fucked with my life enough. You’re only alive right now because I know that Jackie doesn’t want you dead.”

“Shauna, sweetie, please!” Jackie’s feet moved of their own accord, shuffling her closer slowly.

“Do you get that, Lottie?” Shauna sobbed. “That I wish I could fucking—”

“Shauna!” Jackie brushed her shoulder. She jerked away. “Shauna, please, just give me the gun.”

“You will not be the reason that we have to keep dealing with these fucking freaks. You’re not taking anything else from me. They took my daughter! My—” Shauna cried sharply, glancing at Jackie for half a second. “They didn’t take from you! They took from me. You’re not in charge here, so shut the fuck up about forgiveness, because it isn’t yours to forgive!”

Jackie tried to step in front of Shauna. She moved aside smoothly.

“We’re in this together, Shauna,” Lottie insisted. “We’re a team. That’s the beautiful thing about us.”

Shauna’s face twisted in unbridled disgust. “I should’ve killed you a long fucking time ago.”

“Shauna!” Jackie cried. She threw herself in front of her, taking her cheeks in her hands and forcing eye contact. Shauna looked almost confused to see her, studying her face intently. Her pupils constricted slightly, as if she was coming out of a chemical haze. ‘The gun,’ Jackie breathed out. “Give me the gun.”

Shauna swallowed. She lowered her arm. Jackie slid the pistol out of her hand and clicked the safety on, passing it off to Van behind her back.

“You could have,” Lottie’s voice rang through the air brightly. “They were all afraid of you.”

Where Jackie had been terrified before, she was petrified now. Shauna had threatened one of them. Sure, they’d all done their fair share of that in the past few weeks, but this had been real. Shauna had drawn a weapon. The group was tense already and Shauna had thrown a gigantic target on her back. There was no way of predicting how any of them would react. Jackie kept herself in front of her, half-shielding her body with her own, and pressed a hand against her stomach to hold her in place. She scanned the other women’s faces and found only relief and lingering shock. None of them seemed to be gunning for Shauna. Jackie inhaled deep.

“You could’ve easily killed me and taken my place .” Lottie tried to step forward. Van’s foot kicked out in front of her, blocking her path, at the same time that Nat locked her arms around her waist from behind. Lottie froze in place, carrying on like nothing had happened. “And yet you didn’t. You never wanted me dead. You didn’t want it to end. You believed in what we were doing.”

“Lot, please,” Nat choked out, pressing her forehead to the side of her neck desperately. “Let it go.”

“Or maybe you didn’t. Maybe you just liked it. You just didn’t want to have to take responsibility for it. To really own it.” Lottie clinched her hands into fists at her sides. “You’ve always loved proximity to power. All of the glory, none of the guilt.”

“You’re one to talk about alleviating yourself from blame.” Shauna shook her head. Jackie slid her hand to her hip, encompassing her waist and holding her tight. “Lottie the anointed. The high fucking priestess. The one communing with nature. Communing with God.”

“Baby, let’s go get some air,” Jackie tried weakly.

“Jackie would want you to!” Shauna mocked Lottie’s lilting tone, her face pinched with pain. “Jackie would want this. She’ll tell you next time you see her, just—fuck. You knew she was alive the entire fucking time!”

There wasn’t any immediate danger of the women jumping on Shauna. This was between her and Lottie. Everyone else had fallen back. Jackie wrapped her body around Shauna’s, pressing her forehead to her temple. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Shauna kept her arms up, tensing and gesturing as she spoke.

“You fed into my fucking delusions. That wasn’t an accident. You don’t buy your own bullshit, any more than I do. It isn’t Lottie the seer. Yeah, you get some shit right. So what?”

Shauna swayed on her feet. Jackie held her tighter.

“So does Taissa. So does Jackie. We all have the dreams! We all have the fucking… feelings! You’re not divine. You’re a spoiled fucking rich girl who likes feeling special,” Shauna choked on her sobs, “and that’s all you’ve ever been.”

“Air,” Nat said firmly. Jackie didn’t turn to her. She kept her face pressed against Shauna’s and her eyes squeezed shut. “We’re getting air. Now.”

“Good fucking God,” Van muttered under her breath.

Footsteps. The door slamming shut. Shauna exhaling.

Jackie forced Shauna’s arms around herself until she squeezed her back, shaking uncontrollably against her. There was no way they were hiking out today. They were so clearly far from ready. But Jackie wasn’t sure how she was going to keep them all alive until they could.

“Back to bed, my love,” Jackie whispered in her ear. Her fingers combed through Shauna’s hair and her lips found her temple. “We’re just gonna go back to bed for a little while, yeah?”

Dream-like. That was the beauty and the terror of it. Being with Jackie was a dream and Shauna was terrified that she’d wake up one day. Except that she could count on the other women for at least one thing—to fuck everything else up enough that the moments with Jackie didn’t start to feel manufactured, because why would Shauna manufacture the rest of this shit?

Besides, she couldn’t have manufactured the good if she’d tried. She knew because she had tried. There was no mimicking Jackie’s touch. The soothing rumble of her voice or the smell of her hair. The delicate way she handled Shauna, treating her like she deserved the world. Like she was fragile and needed protecting. In those same moments, managing to make her feel stronger than she ever had. Making her feel wanted and needed and beloved.

The Jackie in Shauna’s head had never been this kind to her. Shauna wasn’t capable of imagining love this unconditional, even in her wildest fantasies.

She nodded into Jackie’s shoulder. She had no idea how long they’d been standing there. Nat and Lottie hadn’t come back inside. She’d caught a glimpse of Misty, sitting in front of the fire, tending it silently. She’d heard Van and Taissa pull the ladder down, Taissa quietly telling them to call if they needed them. And still they stood, frozen in place.

Shauna had tried to forgive. She’d tried to forget. She’d let herself be grateful that Jackie was there at all. Loving her—the verb, the action, the physical motions of it, braiding her hair and pulling back their covers and putting her pajamas in the dryer so they’d be warm for her and stupid crazy embarrassing love shit—had eclipsed any real consideration of the massive fucking damage done.

Van wasn't innocent in it. But it hadn't been her call. From what Jackie had said, Van had even offered to help her reach out to Shauna years ago. She'd been weary and tortured and trying to do what was best.

Shauna had told herself that it was the same for Lottie. But she knew that was bullshit. She'd known from day one, deep down. But it'd been a pattern—choke on her rage for what Lottie had taken from her, look at Jackie in her arms or by her side or wrapped around her and remember that she had her, and technically there was no way of knowing if Jackie would even be alive and here and with her if Lottie had done something different.

Feel so suddenly and strongly that it hurt. Rationalize her way out of it, so that she could chase the high of Jackie's bright smile or her deep moans or her gentle hands. Shove it down. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Until Lottie decided to cut too close to the bone.

"Shauna?"

More minutes had collected as she'd let her mind wander—Shauna was certain of it. She tried to respond, but her breath just hitched. A gasp in place of an answer.

Jackie pulled back to look at her. "Are you with me right now, baby?"

Are you with me right now?

Better, Shauna thought, than Jeff's call in this call and response game: are you in there?

As if she vacated her body completely. She had memory lapses. She lost words or sentences or entire conversations. But she was never not in there. She was always in her body. Of course she was. It was semantics, but it needled at her all the same. Her presence wasn't contingent on her awareness of the people prodding her. She didn't cease to exist when she couldn't tell Jeff where his clean shirt was or what was for dinner.

Even Taissa and Natalie and the rest of them, who Shauna knew cared a hell of a lot more than Jeff, used similar language. Is she gone? Is she back?

Are you still with me was are you present in this? Can you hear what I'm saying to you? Are we having a conversation, or am I talking at you?

And maybe it hadn't been a conscious decision on Jackie's part, maybe Shauna was overthinking it, but she'd been the last to know about Shauna's episodes. She'd heard everyone else call it much the same. And she'd chosen to say something different. She viewed it differently.

"I'm with you," Shauna answered. "Just—" she cleared her throat and it burned with the vibration. "Yes. Please. Bed."

Jackie guided her there. Shauna's vision blurred at the edges, but she didn't lose focus of Jackie's hand pulling her along or the back of her head, her hair pulled into a messy ponytail that was near falling out.

"Misty, just knock or yell or whatever, if you need us," Jackie called over her shoulder. "A few hours of rest would be good for all of us, I think. Okay?"

Misty muttered something back, but Shauna wasn't able to force her attention to the words. Jackie urged her through the door and shut it, twisting the lock that wasn't all that useful, because it opened from the outside, too. A creepy fucking prison verison of the bedroom from the cabin—no window, no natural light. A dull battery operated lantern hung by the door. Jackie switched it on and it cast enough yellow on her face for Shauna to look at her. Her eyes were tired. Her skin seemed fairer than usual, with the dark dye coloring her hair.

"I'm—" Shauna swallowed. She closed her eyes. Unsteady on her feet. "I—"

Jackie's arms around her again. Enveloping her. Shifting her to the bed and urging her to sit. Shauna forced her eyes open to find Jackie hovering over her, a large water bottle in hand. She screwed the lid off and handed it to Shauna.

"Drink."

They'd been here before. How long ago? Three weeks? No—only two? God, maybe a little less? A too fancy hotel, less than twelve hours after they'd had sex for the first time and showered together for the first time and committed to each other for the first time. The highest fucking highs, and the lowest fucking rock-bottom lows.

Shauna drank now, as she had then.

"Good." Jackie nodded and finished the little water that was left. She shrugged her jacket off and set it aside. "Lay down."

Shauna blinked at her. She raised a brow—are you really arguing with me right now? When Jackie lifted the covers and sank down next to her, Shauna shimmied down to lay on her back. Jackie grabbed a fistful of her sweater at the waist and tugged, pulling Shauna towards her. Shauna let herself be moved, like Jackie so often did for her. She landed with her head on Jackie's chest and their limbs tangled together.

"Do you remember the time your dad took us on that cruise to The Bahamas?"

"I—yeah, of course I do," Shauna answered softly. Jackie slid her hand under her layers, pressing her forearm along her spine and running her nails in tiny circles between her shoulder blades. "My dad only took us to piss my mom off, because she accused him of spending more time with my brothers. Which was true, but what—"

"Mmm, I still hate that guy." Jackie pressed a kiss to the crown of her head before continuing. "How old were we? Thirteen?"

"Fourteen." Shauna took a deep, shaky breath. "Summer before freshman year."

"That's right," Jackie said, in a way that made Shauna suspect that she hadn't actually forgotten the detail. Like she'd just wanted to make Shauna think about something that wasn't the woods and the cabin and the fight. "Fourteen. And you were so sick, my poor, sweet girl. So sick for so long it started to make you panicky, remember?"

Panicky was an understatement. Shauna had been seasick the entire time. It was the most time she'd spent with her father since the divorce. Time technically spent, because he didn't even bother checking on her, other than to insist that she and Jackie join him and his way-too-young girlfriend for dinner each night. She could barely eat, barely sleep, barely keep water

down. It was too hot and she wanted to go home so fucking badly, but he wouldn't put them on a plane at a port city. He flat out fucking refused. And Shauna had been so fucking angry with him that it'd taken the air right out of her chest.

"Vividly," Shauna groaned. "Is this supposed to be making me feel better, Jax? Because __"

Jackie let out a breath that was half-laugh. "Eventually. You've got to let me get there. I promise I'm going somewhere."

Shauna nodded against her chest. Jackie's nails circled slowly. Shauna slid her fingers into Jackie's free hand, intertwining them.

"I tried telling you stories," Jackie continued gently. "Like when we were little. All sorts of things. Princesses in towers and little red riding hood and… I'm pretty sure the entire plot of Who Framed Roger Rabbit."

Shauna chuckled weakly. "I'm pretty sure you got the entire plot of Who Framed Roger Rabbit wrong."

"Okay, well that's not the point," Jackie said lightly. "The point is, it didn't work. Because your mind kept wandering. You couldn't rest and it was—well, it was making you even sicker. And eventually you got into that argument and I realized it wasn't working, so I switched it up."

That argument was another vast understatement. That argument had been more threat, than anything else. The first time Shauna had seen actual fear flash in someone's eyes because of something she'd said. Her dad had been pushing, pushing, pushing, and she'd felt so fucking miserably sick and Jackie had been trying to keep the peace and he'd snapped at her and she'd blinked back tears and shrank to nothing. Shauna's idiot fucking absentee father had made Jackie cry. So, before she even knew what was happening, Shauna had stood up and leaned over the table and locked her eyes on his. And she'd told him that if he tried to make them come to dinner with him again, she'd push him overboard.

A flash of fear, a joke about teenage girls and their hormones, and that'd been it. Shauna had taken Jackie back to their tiny room and they hadn't eaten a single meal with her father the rest of the trip.

That argument was something that she would never forget. But Shauna couldn't remember what Jackie meant when she said she'd switched it up.

She answered before Shauna could ask.

"I made you start talking to me. I mostly asked you about all the places you wanted to travel. How we would do it, when we were old enough to pick the destination and go on our own. And eventually, you talked yourself to sleep."

"Yeah," Shauna nodded again and tears spilled over her cheeks. She squeezed Jackie's hand. "And I said it was, like, some kind of torture to talk about good vacations while we were on the worst one ever."

Jackie giggled and the sound vibrated through her chest. "You did. But then you played along. And it worked, right?"

“It did.” Shauna swallowed, tried to clear her mind of everything but Jackie—her voice and her smell and her body. Her heart slowed a few beats.

“So,” Jackie dropped another kiss to her head, “do you want to live in a house or an apartment?”

“I—what?”

“When we’re done here, what kind of place do you wanna get? I’m not moving into the house you shared with Jeff. I’m so sorry, but I can’t do it.” Jackie said quickly. Shauna’s mouth opened, dumbfounded. ‘That layout? The whole half-open kitchen thing? It’s a total nonstarter.’ Jackie added dramatically. “It’s like, pick one, y’know? Walls or no walls.”

Shauna laughed, turning her head to press her forehead against Jackie’s chest.

“So, we’ve gotta start from scratch, obviously. And location can be an issue for another time, because of Callie’s school and everything. That’s more complicated. But, do you wanna stick with the single-story, suburban home feel? A yard, so you can have your garden? Or are we going more modern working woman aesthetic?”

Shauna shook her head slightly, stunned by the weight already lifting off of her chest.

“Well?” Jackie squeezed her closer.

“I’m thinking.”

“Perfect,” Jackie said brightly. “Think out loud, baby.”

Shauna talked floor plans and yard size until her eyes felt heavy. She fielded questions about guest rooms and the pros and cons of fixer-uppers and her boring taste in tile, until she couldn’t keep them open anymore. And, when she fell asleep, she didn’t dream of the cabin or endless snow and ice or girls sprinting through the woods. She dreamt of Jackie, standing in the hardware store with her hands on her hips, asking her about two shades of blue paint that were so similar she couldn’t even tell them apart.

“That’s what I was trying to say!”

Misty’s voice pitched up in volume and Shauna jolted awake in Jackie’s arms.

God fucking damnit.

“Jackie?” Shauna gasped.

Her hands searched and her eyes roamed frantically, as though she couldn’t find what she was looking for, even though every touch was Jackie’s body and Jackie filled her entire field of vision. Fingers sliding across Jackie’s chest, up into her hair, across her cheek, against her thigh. Brown eyes, so big and beautiful that she literally got away with murder, darting up and down.

“I’m right here, baby,” Jackie soothed, hooking a finger beneath her jaw to focus her attention. Shauna blinked at her, a little dazed, but present and that was Jackie’s main priority. “I’m okay. You’re okay.”

“Sorry, Misty,” Taissa said forcefully. “We’re all a little stressed, clearly. It isn’t a big deal, we just missed your—”

“You always miss everything I do for you!” Misty screeched. “All of you!”

Shauna’s head jerked toward the door. “Have they been fighting?” she whispered, pushing herself up to sit.

“Yeah,” Jackie whispered back, swinging herself up. “Trying to plan, I think.”

“Mmm,” Shauna hummed, scooting to sit on the edge of the bed next to Jackie. She chewed her lip anxiously. “Is—”

“We should wait to discuss as a group,” Lottie said, quieter than Misty or Tai had been, but still audible. Shauna swallowed, her question seemingly answered by the sound of Lottie’s voice. “Once Jackie and Shauna are done resting, we can figure it out.”

“Why does everyone keep bending to their schedules?” Misty spat incredulously.

“Misty, they’re—” Nat tried weakly, her voice cracking.

“I get it. Jackie’s not dead and Shauna’s losing her mind,” Misty stated, matter-of-fact. “Okay, so? Shauna’s always losing her mind. We really shouldn’t let it derail us every single time she does!”

Shauna made a sour face—a tiny scrunch of her nose and pull at the corner of her mouth. The same sweet little movement that Shauna had made when she’d received a B+ on an essay or a yellow card for being too rough on the field. Jackie kissed her cheek swiftly.

“Okay, Misty! Alright, alright,” Nat grumbled. “I’ll wake them up, just chill the fuck out, yeah?”

Shauna stared at Jackie with wide eyes.

“We’re up!” Jackie called quickly. “Just—we’re… give us five minutes, okay?”

“I’m setting a timer!” Misty warned.

“A timer?” Jackie could hear the eyeroll in Van’s voice. “Where are you even gonna get __”

“My watch. I just pull this screen down and swipe left and it’ll…”

Misty’s voice grew quieter, until she was faint enough for Jackie to tune out. Van must’ve led her away from the door, giving them space. Fucking God bless her.

Shauna was staring at the wall, chewing on her cuticles. Jackie hadn’t seen her do that since they were thirteen. She’d kicked the habit after a nasty cold that Deborah had convinced her was directly related to constantly putting her hands in her mouth. Jackie took her hand and pulled it away slowly. Shauna sighed forcefully.

“Shauna?” Jackie stood and Shauna reached for her wrist reflexively. Jackie knelt in front of her, her hands on her knees. “I’m gonna ask you something and I’d planned on having more time to talk about this, but… I need you to trust me when I say it isn’t a judgment. I just need you to be honest with me, okay?”

Shauna frowned, covering Jackie's hands with her own. "Okay… yeah, just—what is it?"

"Do you think that you could ever get upset enough or… or confused enough that you could… fuck." Jackie shook her head slightly. Shauna squeezed her hands. There was a buzz of urgency surging through her—Jackie could feel it pulsing beneath her fingers. "Sorry. Okay. Just… do you think that there's any situation where you would be capable of hurting me? Like if I intervened when you were… upset with someone?"

Shauna's lips parted slightly. Her jaw clenched and unclenched. She looked broken.

"Not on purpose, baby," Jackie clarified. "I mean… do you think you're always aware enough that it's me, that even if I got in your way, you would realize and… and cool it a little? Because I think you are. I'm almost certain you are. But… just… I thought I should check with you."

"Yes," Shauna said weakly. 'I'm always aware it's you. I won't—I—God, Jackie, fuck.' She buried her face in her hands. Not angry, just so clearly frustrated. "I'm sorry."

Jackie stood, urging Shauna's knees apart until she could stand between them and draw her in. She guided her head to her stomach with one hand, cradling it there as she rubbed her back with the other. Shauna wound her arms around her waist.

"I don't want you to attack anyone like that again. Or… threaten. But… I get it, okay? I—that was fucked up. I understand why it upset you so much."

Shauna nodded, her head bobbing just beneath Jackie's ribcage.

"When I found out about… well, you know I attacked her, too. I just think we all need to try and make peace with each other," Jackie said softly. "And I'm not gonna let you hurt any of them, because I think you'll regret it. So if that happens again, I'm gonna get in front of you quicker, okay?"

Shauna twisted her face up, her chin flat against Jackie's stomach. Jackie brushed her hair back off of her face a few times, her nails raking against her scalp.

"Okay," Shauna agreed quietly.

Jackie guided Shauna to the main room, clutching her hand. Her heart pounded in her chest, reverberating through her skull and pressing on her temples. Fear that they'd turn on Shauna, fear that they'd consider her too much of a liability, fear that leaving her and making her this way would be her undoing.

No one came for Shauna. They barely even reacted to their presence in the room. Van and Taissa sat with their backs to the fire. Tai flashed them a small smile as they headed toward them. Misty was to Van's left, still showing her some function on her watch. Van's eyes were glazed over, barely even feigning interest. Lottie sat in the chair once again, her legs crossed beneath her and a blanket over her lap, and Natalie sat on the floor in front of her—equal parts blocking her and guarding her.

So this was what they did, then. What they'd tried to do after doomcoming all those years ago, when Jackie had refused to let them. Sweep it under the rug. Pretend it never happened. Move on. Jackie hadn't understood it then. She barely understood it now, but she was grateful for it, rather than frustrated by it.

Jackie led Shauna to the chair opposite Lottie's, settling in her lap the moment she sat. Jackie and Nat made eye contact—Jackie just barely smiled, Natalie nodded once. An agreement. A promise. They would keep them contained. They wouldn't let it get to a point where there was a choice to be made between Shauna and Lottie.

"So," Taissa cleared her throat, glancing at Van. "Van and I talked and… I'm on board. We take them out now. If we can find a way to do it where we don't go down with them."

"Lottie?" Van asked, eyeing her carefully. Pleading with her.

"I'm fine with it," Lottie offered. Her hand slid down, gripping Nat's shoulder softly. Nat grimaced, her gaze fixed on the flames behind Van and Taissa.

"Jack?"

"Yeah." Jackie nodded. Shauna held her hips, squeezing briefly. "I'm in."

"Right," Tai breathed out, still uncertain, still shaky. She seemed to be feeling much the same as Jackie. Praying for a better option, with no real belief that her prayers would be answered. "Shauna and Misty, you were already for it. So… Natalie?"

Nat shook her head and ran a hand through her messy tangle of hair. "I fucking hate this."

"If you want to leave," Van offered, "you can. We could hike you out, even. Since it isn't a good idea to go alone. There's time."

"I'm not leaving you guys," Nat scoffed. "You know I'm not. You'd fucking die without me."

She was right. They all knew it. They needed Nat. Without her, they might as well give it up completely.

"So?" Tai prompted weakly.

"So, yeah. Fine. Whatever." Nat rolled her eyes. As if sensing it, Lottie pushed her hand lower, resting her palm between Nat's collarbones. "We'll be the merry fucking murderesses, what's new?"

"Okay," Van said. "So now we just figure out how we're gonna—" Misty huffed loud enough to drown out her voice. Van stopped, leaned back, raised a brow at her. "Did you have something to say, Misty?"

"Yes, in fact, I do." Misty's tone was biting. She nodded so forcefully her glasses slid back and forth on the bridge of her nose. "I've been trying to tell you all morning that I know how we can pull it off. But none of you listen to me, unless I make you sit down formally and that's really tiring, you know? I shouldn't have to put together an entire presentation for my friends to take me seriously!"

Stunned faces blinked at Misty. Jackie shifted her hand over Shauna's, interlacing their fingers against her hip. "Well, we're, uh, very sorry for that, Misty. We're listening now, though, if you want to—"

"It just seems like none of you really care, unless I'm fixing things for you. And even then, it's like you don't even recognize that I'm the one cleaning up your messes." Misty laughed

humorously and shook her head, her curls bouncing around her face. “I mean, I’m the one who’s figured all of this out.” She waved her arms at her sides.

“Well, Midori sort of swooped in there and pieced it all together,” Van muttered quietly.

“See! This is the issue. You were going to let them kill me. As if I wasn’t even worth saving. I haven’t forgotten that! So why should I fix this for—”

“Hold on,” Jackie frowned, “what do you mean let them kill you?”

“They grabbed Misty as collateral,” Nat explained with a heavy sigh, ‘and dumb and dumber over there,’ she jerked her chin at Van and Shauna in turn, “were less than motivated to drop their weapons.”

“To be fair, Misty,” Shauna sounded beyond exhausted, every word heavy with exasperation, “I wasn’t all that motivated to save my own daughter with Jackie on the line, so… it isn’t personal.”

“You dropped it for Natalie! When they threatened Natalie instead!” Misty argued, her face flushing with anger. Jackie hadn’t seen her lose this much control since they were teens. ‘Which was fair. You should have. Who wouldn’t save Natalie?’ Nat rubbed her eyes wearily. “But that makes your excuse total… bullshit!”

“Okay, you’re right, Misty,” Van forced out. Her expression didn’t betray her annoyance. Not technically. But Jackie could read it so sharply, she might as well have written fuck you Misty Quigley on her forehead. “We’re sorry. Right, Shauna? That was fucked up.”

“Yeah,” Shauna mumbled, much less convincing. “We’re sorry.”

Misty sniffed. She tucked her chin toward her shoulder and raised it briefly in a shrug, her arms folded tight across her chest. “Fine. Apology accepted. I know you probably aren’t capable of doing better than that.”

“So… what’s your idea?” Jackie asked, forcing a small smile. She traced Shauna’s wrist bone with her thumb and felt her relax a little.

“They’re all known to be off. Mentally ill. Obsessives,” Misty explained simply. ‘It’s clear that they kidnapped some people, so who’s to say that they didn’t kidnap all of us? Tricked us into getting together with some mysterious postcards,’ Misty grinned, beyond pleased with herself, “trailed us, and forced us out here.”

She pulled an impressively genuine face—mock fear and innocent surprise. If Misty could pull it off, the rest of them could easily. Shauna, Jackie’s precious little pathological liar. Lottie, the resident cult leader. Taissa, the successful politician. Van, Nat, and Jackie, the kids who’d been learning to hide their true feelings since they could walk. It wouldn’t be an issue, swaying public opinion in their favor.

“We didn’t have any way of getting out, since they were armed,” Misty continued. Her expression shifted back to its usual calm interest. “Their plan was a ritual sacrifice of us, followed by a mass suicide. We just managed to fight our way out during the chaos.”

Brilliant.

It was honestly fucking brilliant. If they could pull it off, covering it wouldn't be much of a stretch. Not with the Yellowjackets fame. Not with the distraction of a living Jackie Taylor, whose face had been plastered on magazines over the years, who was remembered as some sort of fucking American sweetheart. They'd have to figure out her story and the attention was going to make her miserable, but it would be plenty to redirect the headlines. Girls failed by the world, unfathomably unlucky, yet again. They survived the wilderness against all odds and, twenty-five years later, they fought their way out of near-certain death.

"It could work," Tai said slowly, her brows pinched in thought. "When they get here, we'll have the element of surprise. We make them think that we're on board in some manner, convince them that they had the ritual wrong, say some bullshit about guiding them or whatever. Get them to drink the fucking kool-aid."

"Some of them might honestly be on board with killing themselves," Shauna mused quietly. "And the ones who aren't… we take care of. We can shoot runners and pin it on the group itself. We even have their guns."

"So… Jonestown," Nat groaned, throwing her head back against Lottie's lap. Lottie brushed a thumb against her cheekbone and scrunched her face in sympathetic confirmation. Nat looked back at the group. "We're doing an impromptu fucking Jonestown?"

Van shrugged, stretching her legs out in front of her. "You got a better idea?"

Nat pouted, her lips pulled into an impossible upside-down horseshoe of a frown. "Misty," she sighed heavily, "you still good at sniffing out poisonous plants?"

"Actually," Misty smiled warmly, "I noticed some hemlock on the way in."

29. let yourselves feel it

1996

"I'm just saying that there's a limit on these things, Shauna!" Jackie tossed her duffel on the ground at her feet, her hairbrush and a single cleat tumbling out of the unzipped flap with the force of it. "And at this point I'm worried you'll hit it. There's, like, a yellow card ceiling."

"Is there?" Shauna raised a brow, then her arms, pulling her sweaty jersey over her head and chucking it into her hamper. They'd skipped their usual post-home game showers in the locker room, on account of… everything.

"Yes, Shipman!" Jackie huffed out. A strand of hair swayed in front of her forehead, before settling across her eyes. Shauna reached out and brushed it back reflexively. Jackie swallowed. Her gaze flicked down quickly. "There's a—a limit. It's not that I don't appreciate it. I do. Just… I won't have you benched forever because of me."

"What is it?"

Jackie cocked her head to the side. "What's what?"

"The limit." Shauna smirked. "You said there's a limit. So… what is it?"

"Well… I don't—I'm not sure exactly what it is," Jackie fiddled with the hem of her shorts anxiously. "But I'm gonna have to find out now, aren't I?"

"If Lincoln pulls that shit again in playoffs then yeah, maybe," Shauna tried to joke. Jackie shifted closer to tears than laughter. "Hey… I'm just kidding. I didn't mean to—"

"Are you gonna shower?" Jackie asked abruptly. "Or should I go first?"

"You can go." Shauna's words came out more whisper than she'd have liked. Weaker.

Jackie shuffled into the bathroom, clutching her pajamas to her chest. It was weird. Usually she was careful to hold them away from her body to avoid getting them gross.

Shit.

Jackie usually took long showers after games and Shauna hated waiting for her to get out on the best of days, but today was decidedly not the best. All because some cunt had decided to shoulder-check Jackie way too fucking hard. Not on accident. Not a little rough. Not even out of desperation, really. (Not that Shauna would've reacted any differently regardless, but it fucking mattered, even if the idiot ref didn't seem to think so.)

No, that bitch had targeted Jackie.

She'd leered at her since kickoff, a center back with a fucking attitude problem. Jackie was stellar at keeping her balance, her childhood ballet lessons good for something other than tears and anxiety at Mrs. Taylor's hand. She didn't yelp and tumble to the ground for nothing. And Shauna had sort of… lost it.

She hadn't meant to freak out. She really hadn't planned it. How could she have, when all she could think about was Jackie on the ground? Tears in her eyes for the first time ever during a game, promising Shauna that she was fine, as the trainer did range-of-motion checks to make sure that the smug cunt— who got away with no caution whatsoever— hadn't done lasting damage. Taissa and Natalie had been on the ref's ass immediately, Coach Martinez both backing up their point and demanding that they back the hell off in the same breath. Lottie, Van, and Laura Lee had been at Jackie's side—they'd all made it there seconds after Shauna had crashed to the ground in front of her. Those bases had been covered so Shauna, her brain taking a backseat to her body, had stormed across the field toward the bitch in her bright purple jersey. She'd been three feet from throwing a punch when she was airlifted away. Coach Scott and Misty—one under each arm, dragging her back so fast her feet left the ground.

Jackie had been okay. Hurting, but okay. She'd refused to be benched, just as Shauna had expected, because they didn't have another striker good enough to take on Lincoln's defense. So the next time Shauna had gotten control of the ball, she hadn't passed to Nat like she should've. She'd broken free, aimed well, and kicked the ball as hard as she possibly could.

Shauna probably should've landed herself a red card, but Coach Scott was good with refs, so she ended up with yellow. The bitch who'd shoved Jackie probably should've landed herself a yellow card, but Shauna had made sure that she'd ended up with bright red, running all the way down her neck from her broken to shit nose.

"Fuck," Shauna muttered under her breath.

She grabbed pajamas to change into and made her way to her mom's en suite bathroom. She rarely used it, but she was desperate to cut down the amount of time she'd have to spend stewing about whether Jackie was going to be upset with her or not. When she was done, she hurried back to her room to find Jackie already sitting in her bed, her wet hair clinging to her cheeks. She wore one of Shauna's shirts—a black and orange Alice In Chains tour tee that she'd found at a thrift store. It was one of Jackie's favorites to steal, because it was a little big on Shauna, which meant it fell even lower on her thighs.

Shauna chewed her lip and sat down carefully next to her. Anxious to sit on her own fucking bed, because she was scared shitless that Jackie was upset with her.

"Jackie, I—"

"Shauna, are we—"

They started at the same time. Stopped at the same time. Jackie blinked at her for a moment, before cracking a smile. Relief pooled in Shauna's stomach, heavy and warm and comfortable.

"You can go first," Jackie offered.

Shauna shook her head. "No, go ahead."

"I know you were just… being protective of me," Jackie said carefully, 'but… I worry, Shauna. I don't want you getting hurt or—or getting in trouble for me. I'm okay. All I care about is you being on that goddamn field with me when we win states this year.' The grin that broke out across Jackie's face was intoxicating. Shauna nodded quickly. "Okay?"

“Okay. Yeah, Jax. I’ll try to keep the yellow cards to an absolute minimum.”

She smirked as Jackie rolled her eyes, pulling her into a hug.

“The number is zero! That was the whole point of the talk, Shipman.” Shauna let her chin rest on Jackie’s shoulder, inhaling the peppermint of her own shampoo on Jackie’s hair, the smell of Jackie’s skin, the faintest hint of strawberry from the chapstick that she always applied fresh out of the shower. ‘It was, like, totally badass though,’ Jackie admitted quietly. “You’ve got killer aim.”

Shauna giggled with Jackie. She let her hands wander, safe in the territory of Jackie’s back, trailing from the small of it up to her shoulders and back down. Jackie hummed in her ear, happy and relaxed. A cat’s purr, coming from her, as she sank as close to Shauna as she could. (A sign that they would soon be forcing down enough of the lukewarm, acrid vodka hidden in the back of Shauna’s closet to allow themselves to get even closer.)

December 29th, 2021

“So… we’re all in agreement that Shauna isn’t allowed access to guns anymore, right?” Nat surveyed the room, one brow arched, daring them to disagree. “And Lottie actually hasn’t bothered to touch one this whole time anyway, but… y’know, same ban there.”

They’d forced some lunch down and regrouped, sitting in a circle on the cabin floor. There was a wood stove for heat along with the fireplace, tucked in the corner near the pantry. Cheating, Misty had tsked when they’d first come in. Jackie was just grateful for the fucking warmth, which was the sane reaction. One of the few she had left.

Her sane reactions had whittled down over the years, the weathering of her resolve culminating in this moment— Shauna cross-legged next to her on a cushion they’d snagged from the couch, their knees bumping, her long fingers absently fiddling with the leg of Jackie’s sweats in the exact same way she used to worry the blanket she’d slept with until they were eleven. The best fucking thing to ever happen to Jackie and—hands-down, without a fucking doubt—the most insane.

She’d been settled a month ago. A sweet, easy-going girlfriend, a nicer-than-average apartment in the city, consistent work with one publisher for the first time in a long time. Then Lottie had called her in a panic, a telltale storm of words whipping into a frenzy that Jackie hadn’t heard the likes of in years. Natalie suicidal, something coming her way beyond her own rifle, and would Jackie be a fucking dear and check it out, because Lottie couldn’t put one foot in front of the other. And oh yeah, she’d forgotten to mention that she’d purchased Shauna’s journals—yes, those journals—on the black fucking market recently, which was a little concerning and don’t tell Van, because she’s not ready for this.

So naturally, Jackie had asked for what?

What the fuck was this?

Because she had a life, you know. A nice stable boring life as Lucy Price—a redhead originally from Ottawa, whose job was actually much less exciting than it sounded. She packed her girlfriend’s lunch and wrote her silly little notes. She watched a lot of movies. She

ordered far too much takeout. She took long baths every night and slept in silk sheets, just because she could.

But Lottie had asked her to go, in a way that was more demand than question, and Jackie had gone. There was no pausing, no questioning, no arguing. It was chilling, still, how quickly Jackie found herself willing to listen to her instruction on those few occasions that she gave it.

She'd been right, of course. Loaded rifle, phone and wallet, leather and fishnets and eyeliner, but no Natalie. Then came the call. Misty fucking Quigley of all people, telling her that Nat had been kidnapped by some freaks, because naturally she'd been watching her room with a hidden camera. No surprise in her tone upon hearing Jackie's voice, just an I knew it glint and a promise that she'd text Shauna's address when they hung up.

So that was it.

Jackie would've been able to find her address at any time. Of course she would've. But this had been different. This had been them, pushed together. Postcards and visions of danger and kidnappings and Jackie making the adrenaline filled decision to drive to Shauna's house unannounced.

The moment she'd pulled the address up on maps, she'd known—everything sane and normal that she'd pretended was hers was done for.

The surprise, though, had been that she'd landed herself here. She'd known that Shauna would be her undoing, but she'd expected suffering and rejection and all the things that had nearly killed her the first time around. She hadn't expected a whirlwind romance, picking up where they'd left off, being handsy like teenagers and rushing into love. She'd realized, just a few hours into being reunited with Shauna, that she was going to fight like hell to get to this place. Side by side, no matter what. Painful, messy, stupid, shattering, insane love. Fucking peace at last.

Jackie was finally where she was meant to be—slipping Shauna's hand into her own to soften the potential blow of agreeing that no, she shouldn't have access to firearms.

"I packed the wool ones, did you see them in—"

"Come here," Jackie cut Shauna off firmly. She reached for her, her arms outstretched and her fingers wiggling, from where she sat at the edge of the bed. One boot laced, one undone. Her hair half out of its ponytail. "Please?"

Shauna straightened her sweater, pulling down on the hem as she made her way to Jackie. The moment she was close enough, Jackie wrapped her arms around her middle and yanked her in, laying her cheek against her stomach.

Shauna rubbed her back with one hand, trailing her fingers through her hair with the other. "You okay?"

"Yes, baby," Jackie squeezed her waist. "I'm okay. I put on the wool socks. I put on two pairs of socks."

“Did you—”

“I tucked the first pair under my leggings and the second pair over them, yes. And then I put the sweats on top. My toes are all accounted for.”

They were about to head to the lake to get a feel for what they were working with. It was nothing more than a short walk, according to Jackie’s late kidnappers —whose bodies they’d dragged away from the cabin less than an hour ago, tucking them into some brush that only partially obscured them.

But it was cold. Freezing. And Jackie ran cold already. She always had—pressing against Shauna in her twin bed, as if they weren’t already close enough, taking showers so hot they stained her skin a rosy pink, piling every throw blanket in the house on the couch before movies. Jackie ran cold and Shauna ran hot. It had always been that way. Icy toes against her calf making her yelp while Jackie giggled, Jackie fanning her with folded up construction paper in the summer because her cheeks flushed too red, constant readjusting of the temperamental thermostat in Kevin Carnold.

(Shauna told herself that the cold was what she was worried about, more than anything. She couldn’t allow her mind to wander into other territories, questions of what this group had set up, how accurate it was to what they’d done. How Jackie would react, because all Shauna had really told her was that they’d killed the other girls out there, and it seemed as though Van and Lottie had given her even less detail over the years. So Shauna focused on how many layers Jackie had on and whether they alternated, over and under, to trap the most heat.)

“I dealt with it too, y’know,” Jackie said quietly, snapping Shauna out of her thoughts. “The cold, I mean. It was colder, actually. Than the cabin. Insulated some, but… no one to share body heat with. I… I know all the tricks, Shauna. I promise.”

Shauna’s heart dropped to her stomach. Everything inside her buzzed so fast she couldn’t catch any individual thoughts, just suffocating surges of emotion—guilt, regret, anger, a deep sadness that outweighed the rest combined. She fought the urge to shove Jackie back into the bed and pull the covers over their heads. Let the others deal with it—they could stay inside, warm and together.

“You’re right. I’m sorry, I just…”

“You worry,” Jackie filled in, leaning back to look at her. She gripped Shauna’s waist tight and smiled. “That’s okay. You can worry. Just… I can take care of myself better than you think. I’m pretty tough, actually. Maybe not kill a bunny and serve it for dinner tough, but… I have my moments.”

Shauna smirked back at her. “You could if you wanted to.”

“You’re right.” Jackie laced her fingers behind Shauna’s neck and pulled her down for a kiss. “But why the fuck would I want to?”

“Here you go.” Sadie handed Callie a giant cup.

She wore gloves—thin and such a pale pink they were almost white. Callie hadn’t expected anyone else to want a slurpee when she’d put in her requests for Sadie and Midori’s

7/11 run, but Sadie had come back with one in each hand. Matching, down to the dollops of red and brown pressed against the dome lid—half-cherry, half-cola—and the bright purple straws. They were in the front seat of Sadie's car. Midori had gotten in with Callie's dad, after making a valiant attempt at pretending like it was for some reason other than letting the girls whose moms might die have a moment.

"Thanks." Callie took a slow sip, watching as Sadie stared at the tree-line. She was quiet. Discerning and a little mistrustful, kind of like Callie's mom. Much warmer, though. She felt like Jackie's daughter. "Do they… talk about it with you? Anything that happened out there?"

Sadie laughed a little, her freckled cheeks scrunching up. "No. Not at all. I don't think they talk about it with each other, to be honest."

"Yeah. Same with my mom. But… I mean with her it's like… you can tell. You can tell something's really wrong, y'know?"

Her mom would kill her for talking like this if she knew. With Jackie's kind-of-daughter, no less. Sadie had explained, once they'd calmed down, that Jackie wasn't her biological mom. She wasn't even her adoptive mom, technically speaking. Jackie had zero obligation to her. Sadie was her friend's ex-girlfriend's kid. Except the friend in question had chosen to adopt her when her actual mom had died. (Van— Callie had a face for the name, even if it was twenty-five years outdated, because she was in one of her favorite photos of her mom. Jackie in the center, one arm around each of them, all three of them looking happy and young and not… damaged beyond fucking repair.) So that was one woman who'd gone through the same exact shitty trauma that Callie's mom had and chosen to parent a kid that wasn't even hers. And on top of that, Sadie got Jackie— another step removed from actual responsibility for her, the same fucking trauma, and the same desire to mother her, even though absolutely no one would expect her to.

Callie was happy for her and all, but it fucking sucked getting dealt the Shauna card. And it stung even more now, the way her mom couldn't bring herself to give one single shit about her, knowing that two of the seven woman on the entire planet who had been through what she'd been through were like, adoptive moms extraordinaire.

"Oh, God, yeah." Sadie abandoned her drink in the cup holder and turned her entire body toward Callie's. "You can absolutely tell. With them, I mean. Jackie and my mom. I actually figured it out myself. Who Jackie was and everything."

"You did?"

"Yep," Sadie popped the p, a small smile pulling at her lips. "I knew my mom had been in the crash, but they hadn't told me that Jackie was Jackie. They'd actually started telling me that she was Jackie's cousin and that's how they'd met, because when you really start looking at the photos the resemblance is there. It's just easy to ignore if you think it's impossible, but I had a hunch."

"Cousin," Callie snorted, shaking her head. "They lie too, then."

"They do. I'm sure they all do." Sadie's gaze kept flicking to the woods, as through they might pop out just to counter her. "So… when I was thirteen, I read everything I could about it and pieced it together. I had a whole presentation ready one day on how I knew that Jackie

was Jackie and why they should stop lying to me. Didn't get very far though. They just sort of cried and fessed up."

"Presentation?" Callie raised a brow.

"A posterboard and everything." Sadie raised her slurpee in mock cheers.

"Wow, you had your shit way more together than I ever did." Callie chewed on her lip, trying to stem the flow of the secret that she knew was about to fly out of her mouth. It didn't work. Sadie was too easy to talk to and Callie was too ready to talk. "I stole my mom's journals," she blurted out.

Sadie looked at her the same way Jackie had the night before, when she'd asked if she thought that those freaks were going to do something to them in the night. Her head tilted just slightly, her brows knitted in equal parts concern and inquiry.

"She kept her journals from… out there. They were in a safe, but the code was easy. 2525."

"The flight number," Sadie murmured, a little shocked.

Callie had been too, when it'd worked. She'd tried Jackie's birthdate first—1013. Then the month and year Jackie was born. Her mother's own birthday, her bubbe's, her dad's, the year the plane had gone down, and then, on a whim with her breath held, her own birthday. But no. It'd been 2525 and yeah, her mom really needed some fucking therapy.

"Yeah, that's what I mean by totally not well. I couldn't keep them in my room, because she'd find them and if she did she'd fucking kill me. So… I took them to school with me." Callie swallowed hard, avoiding Sadie's eyes. "I was gonna skim them at lunch and put them back that night but… I left my bag in study hall for five minutes and someone fucking stole them. I think… I think it was these assholes and maybe… maybe I'm the reason this all—"

"No," Sadie interrupted firmly. 'No, you're not the reason for any of this. They probably did take them, but they would've done all of this shit anyway. And think about it… if they were watching you like that, if they were there to take them, that means that they were already planning,' Sadie motioned toward the trees vaguely, "this. It isn't your fault, Callie. I promise."

Sadie was right. They had already been following her and of course that meant that the evil fucking plan was already in full swing, but knowing that some creeps had been stalking her for ages? That didn't really make Callie feel all that better. The hug that Sadie pulled her into did, though, just enough to take the edge off.

It was off.

Of course it was. This was Maine. Fir trees outweighed pines. The first snowfall hadn't hit yet and Shauna had no way of knowing if that was normal or not, but she knew all too fucking well that in the Canadian Rockies there were already heavy, smothering blankets of white.

She checked the forecast every fall. A sick habit she had—pulling up weather reports and noting the dates of the first snow to stick. Sometimes as early as September. There were no exact records for the part of the forest that'd housed their shitty cabin, because remote parts of the wilderness didn't exactly have a meteorologist checking their yard stick each morning, but as far as Shauna could tell from reports in the surrounding areas, 1996 had been a record breaking year. Too much snow. Rolling in too early. Falling too fast.

Unfair.

Fucking unfair. Twisted and fated. Punishment.

"Shauna?" Tai touched her elbow gently.

She jerked back and met her eyes, sliding her hand into Tai's just long enough to squeeze twice.

It was off in other ways, too. The lake was clearly the center of things for them, whereas trudging around the frozen lake was something that only Travis and Natalie had done, very occasionally, in desperate search of food. There were spikes and snares scattered around—too visible to be accurate, but Shauna wondered if they'd finished setting up yet or if this was simply their stockpile.

Some things were right. Animal skulls hung from low branches. Rudimentary home crafts — stones and leaves and pinecones attached to them. A partial crescent of logs, pushed together like a row of bleacher seating, surrounded a recently used firepit. Makeshift torches —slightly too nice, too clearly made with actual tools—completed the circle. Jackie's eyes were fixed on the worst part of it all, unblinking and wide.

A deer hung from a pulley wound through one of the trees. Its hind ankles were bound and knotted in rope, its head lolled near the ground, and a careful slice across its neck was clearly responsible for the pool of dark brownish-red beneath it. It was difficult to tell exactly how old it was, with temperatures below freezing, but Shauna guessed around two or three days. A test run, just before they'd arrived.

Jackie stumbled backwards. She stared between the deer carcass and Shauna, recognition flashing in her hazel eyes.

"So… so you—this was—this—this—" Jackie stalled out. She wore the same expression she had the night they'd given her the overview— a twisted grimace of physical pain, shrouded slightly in an attempt not to upset them. Flickering between unbridled disgust and forced calm.

It was so different out here. Where there had been a dinner table and formal seating, there was dirt and splintering logs. A life size recreation surrounded them. There was no reimagining of the scene, no filter of Misty's narration and her fucking envelope of visual aides and sweetening the setting in your mind's eye. Jackie was standing in the middle of their fucking killing grounds, with the sharp fucking realization that the fate the cult had wanted her to meet was truly ripped out of their own pasts.

Shauna reached for her arm, brushing it tentatively. "Jackie, I—"

Jackie staggered backward, just out of reach. It was her on one side, the six of them on the other. She shuddered, her entire body shaking, and held her hands up at her sides. Not in a

pushing away or barricading motion—it was a desperate plea to freeze. To halt this moment. To undo what they'd done twenty-five years ago.

"Did you—you— God, fuck!" Jackie sobbed. Her eyes moved rapidly between them. Her mouth hung open in a silent cry. She took a deep, gasping breath and pressed one hand over her chest, the other to her stomach. "Mari?" she cried, quiet and broken.

There was eerie silence—even the wind stopping shifting through the trees, as if the forest itself was listening. Shauna looked at the rest of the women. All shamed into quiet, even Misty. Eyes cast to their feet or brimming with tears.

"Shauna?" Jackie demanded. Shauna swallowed hard. Nodded. "Akilah?"

Shauna nodded again, tears pricking the back of her eyes.

"Fuck!" Jackie's scream ripped through the silence and the woods moved again. Birds shot out of the trees and took flight above their heads. The wind shook the leaves that had held on through the death of fall to the ground.

"Jackie," Lottie said calmly, her arms outstretched and her palms up. "We had to—"

"No!" Jackie screamed, pointing a shaking finger at her. 'No, bullshit! There was no fucking had to!' Anger mixed with the despair, Jackie's eyes flashing wide and wild. "Fuck—fuck had to, you—you fucking—" She covered her mouth and sobbed, trembling head to toe. Horror. Jackie was horrified. Scared of them.

Shauna's heart dropped. Low, low, lower. Everything blurred around the edges. She was rooted to the spot. She couldn't move, couldn't think, couldn't speak.

"Jackie—" Van stepped forward and brushed her shoulder with a tentative hand.

"No!" Jackie sobbed, jerking away. "Just— fuck, just don't touch me for a minute! Just—just—give me—" her sob sounded more scream than anything else, sharp and fierce, "give me a minute!"

"Jackie, we were kids." Tai chewed her lip. "Confused and—and scared and starving and in… fucking psychosis. We couldn't help—"

"God, can't you just be sorry?"

Jackie shook her head and covered her mouth. Her upper body lurched forward and she tucked her chin. When she pulled her hand away from her lips, Shauna shored herself equally for a rush of sick or a rush of pained words. Jackie spit on the ground, nothing coming up but mucus and saliva from the tears. She crouched, sitting on her heels, and pressed her hands against her knees. When she turned her face up towards them, she was begging. Almost supplicant. It should've been the other fucking way around, but Shauna could no sooner move her body right now than undo what they'd done. It was taking everything in her to stay present.

"Just—just let yourselves feel it! Please," Jackie gasped. She held the sides of her head just as she had when the storm had hit—that almost supernatural headache that'd so clearly tortured her. Jackie in pain, again. Because of them. Because of Shauna. "Just for a fucking minute be… be remorseful! Show me that you can!"

Nat stumbled forward like a new foal. Her staggering steps and jerking arms would've been almost funny, if anything about this could be. Jackie watched her, tears rolling down her own face quicker than they could clear it, multiplying until her cheeks were coated.

"You're right," Nat choked out, sinking to her knees in front of Jackie. "You're—we—we turned into fucking monsters and we never wanna deal with it but you're right. We need to fucking… own it. To remember that we're… fuck, I don't know. People."

Nat was the last one who needed to be pushed into reckoning with their depravity and they all knew it. Jackie nodded. Hiccuped. Dropped all the way to her knees to mirror Nat and reached for her. Everyone's eyes remained fixed on them as they held each other tight. Their shoulders shook and their fingers dug into each other's backs.

"I'm sorry," Nat muttered over and over. "I'm so fucking sorry."

It was clear that Natalie was apologizing not to Jackie, but to the girls who weren't there. Girls who would never be there again. Jackie smoothed her hair back soothingly, hushing her until she quieted. Nat broke the embrace, batting tears off of her cheeks and sniffing loudly. Lottie offered her a hand. She took it without hesitation, allowing Lottie to pull her to her feet. Jackie and Shauna made heavy eye contact. They'd both stopped crying—it was all heavy pained looks. Nervous. Jackie looked nervous and Shauna knew that she must, too.

Shauna lowered herself to the ground, sitting cross-legged in front of Jackie. "The guilt—" her voice caught, she cleared her throat and started again. "The guilt that I felt for you, for everything I did to you, took it all up. I couldn't—" Shauna squeezed her eyes shut, "there was no room for any more. I'm already bad at… at that stuff and I couldn't think about any of the other shit I've done. I couldn't have happiness or remorse or fucking… love for anything else, just—it was all you, Jackie."

Shauna felt her before she saw her, her eyes still closed tight as Jackie shifted to pull her into her arms. Their chins on each other's shoulders, their arms circled tight around each other. Shauna turned to breathe her in—her nose tucked just behind her ear.

"I'm sorry," Shauna whispered. And she meant it. She was fucking sorry. To Jackie, always. To the rest of the girls. To Callie. In that moment, with Jackie cradling the back of her head and pressing as close to her as she could, Shauna truly felt remorse in every inch of her body. Not for show. Not because she knew that she was meant to. True, genuine, uncontrollable sorrow. "I'm sorry. I wish I could—I wish—I—I'm so sorry."

"Okay, baby. Okay." Jackie rocked her from side to side softly. 'We're gonna get through it.' Shauna shook her head against the side of Jackie's neck. "We are," Jackie insisted firmly. "I just needed… I'm not trying to shame you, okay? We're—it was—I get it, okay? I love you. This doesn't make me love you any less. I just needed to—to stop pretending like it was… okay."

"We can't survive it, Jackie," Shauna breathed out against her neck. "We… we can't survive not pretending. I—I just—" Her heart pounded harder, slamming against her throat until she physically choked on the pressure of it.

"Not all the time," Jackie whispered. "Not all the time, baby. I'm not asking for that. We can let it go. We can figure it out. I just needed to know that you… that you're capable of feeling it, okay? That's all."

The translation of that, the part Jackie was leaving unsaid, was that she just needed to know that Shauna wasn't an unfeeling psychopath, and Shauna couldn't even be upset about that because she constantly had to ask herself that same fucking question. Maybe she had been. Maybe, with Jackie gone at her hands, Shauna had shifted into something close. Done a stint as a… fucking sadist, incapable of love or remorse. But with Jackie's breath against her cheek and chest against her own, Shauna knew that she could now feel it all, and then some.

"Just watch where you're going and we should be fine." Misty sidestepped a log, eyeing it carefully, as though something might spring out at her. "Just, y'know, keep an eye out."

"I don't like this," Nat grumbled. She held a long stick out in front of her, prodding at the ground as she walked. "Stupid fucking plan."

"We need to see what we're working with. Whether all they have is right there at the… main site."

Van shifted her eyes away from Jackie's. Guilty. Just like the rest of them. It hurt Jackie to see them like that, but she needed it. She couldn't just… let that shit slide indefinitely. Besides, barely an hour had passed and everyone seemed to have evened out for the most part. Even Jackie's racing heart had slowed—she'd deal with the lingering effects of seeing it all later. They had work to do, and they were nothing if not good compartmentalizers.

"They have these woods pretty well infiltrated," Van pushed on. "They might have more and if they do we've gotta know, or we lose whatever advantage we have along with any illusion that we're in on it."

"It'll be fine," Lottie soothed, running a hand across the small of Nat's back. Nat scrunched her cheeks at her, skeptical. "Really, it will."

"We've covered at least half a mile," Taissa sighed. Van kept looking back, ensuring that she was walking directly in her footsteps. Tai rolled her eyes— gently, much more love than true annoyance in it. "Just how much are we trying to fan out?"

"About a mile each way should do it. Doubt there's anything beyond that if there's nothing between here and there." Van shrugged. "What do you think, Mist—"

One moment, Shauna's fingers were firmly intertwined with Jackie's, huffs of cold air the only sound coming from her slightly parted lips, and the next Jackie's hand was empty. Shauna was tripping forward with a yelp, their hold on each other instantly broken. Quick as lightning, there was a whooshing, whipping sound that surprised Van into silence. Jackie's eyes landed on Shauna just in time to see the catalyst for her screams.

Time slowed so much that Jackie felt everyone around her had frozen. That only she was still moving. That the universe was giving her time to take this in.

She hadn't been paying enough attention. She'd let this happen. Shauna had been rocked to her core (thanks to her), so why the hell had she expected her to be able to map their path? Shauna was almost certainly teetering on the edge of disassociation and Jackie had let her walk straight into a trap.

A trip wire. Jackie saw the glint of metal—nothing more than a fucking tent stake— that'd held the slim cord in place as she threw herself to the ground next to Shauna, noticing now what she should've before Shauna had dislodged it.

Shauna.

Shauna on her hands and knees, a glint of silver attached to a wooden pole sticking out of her body. Gasping for air, whether out of panic or a physiological inability to breathe, Jackie couldn't tell. The placement of the blade could mean fucking anything. Digging into the back of her right shoulder, a mess of blood pouring down her back. (Her right shoulder? A little part of Jackie clung to that, before she could force it aside, because Jackie had been worrying about her right shoulder for weeks already, and what were the odds? What were the fucking odds of that?) And God, she'd insisted on taking her warmest layer off—a thick coat that would've softened the blow— because Jackie had shivered. So all of this, from throwing her off of her game, to failing to protect her, to stealing the fucking shirt off of her back, was Jackie's fault.

"Everyone freeze!" Nat screamed.

As the rest of the women froze, the world started moving around them again.

"Shauna!" Jackie gasped.

She sat in front of her, the ground so cold she felt it in her knees through her thick sweats and the leggings she'd layered beneath them. Shauna yelped again and the spear swayed. Jackie's hand shot out instinctually, grabbing ahold and keeping it still.

"Get it out!" Shauna pleaded desperately. She moved, trying to sit up, wriggling like a startled, wounded animal. Jackie used her free hand to grip her forearm, holding her in place. "Jackie!"

Jackie's eyes snapped to Misty, because she was pretty fucking sure that she wasn't supposed to move the thing lodged into Shauna. Blood was gushing down her back, saturating her heavy wool sweater, turning baby blue a deep ruby red.

"Don't move it!" Misty answered Jackie's unasked question. She was frozen in place, one foot suspended above the ground. Grotesquely comical. "Hold it in place, don't let it shift!"

"Misty, you can put your fucking foot down," Nat clarified. "Just don't step forward. Van, we need to do a real goddamn sweep. Old school. They aren't fucking playing."

Jackie's heart dropped. "What else could there—"

"Jackie, just worry about Shauna," Tai said soothingly. "Just stay right where you are and worry about her, okay? We've got this."

Jackie took her orders to heart, because she was certain that doing anything else was going to drive her insane. A sweep? She'd known that there were traps but… this systemic violence, this familiarity— it threatened to send her spinning again if she let herself consider it. So she tuned out everything she could. A few things cut through—Nat's muttering about how she'd fucking known better and Misty's instruction for the others to take the exact path they'd come on back to the cabin for supplies, because they needed more than what she had on her—but mostly Jackie focused on Shauna. Her pained cries quieted to grunts and whimpers as her

body adjusted to the pain. She was able to hold herself up, moving slowly as Jackie kept the spear in place. And, after what felt like an eternity, Misty and Nat appeared behind Shauna and took over that duty.

As Misty assessed the damage, Jackie took both of Shauna's hands, rubbing her thumbs back and forth across the backs of them.

"I'm okay," Shauna promised softly.

Too soft, her voice was too soft. She always sounded gentle. Always sweet. (Except when she wasn't, of course.) But this was too light. Jackie started to crane her neck to get a better look behind her.

"Hey! Hey, no— shit—" Shauna hissed in pain, wincing as Misty's hands twitched around the spear. "No. Jax, don't look. Okay? Just— fuck—" Tears filled her deep brown eyes. Jackie squeezed her hands tighter. "I want you right here. I want you with me. Please?"

Jackie nodded, her lips sealed shut against the sobs that she feared would pour out of her if she gave them the opportunity.

"Shauna, take a deep breath for me," Misty ordered urgently.

"A deep breath?" Shauna sputtered. She turned her face up toward Jackie's and her resolve slackened. Her lower lip trembled. Her eyes widened. "I can't—I can't—I can barely take a—a shallow breath."

"Why?" Jackie demanded. She transferred both of Shauna's hands into one of hers, pressing them against her thigh. With her newly freed hand, she swept Shauna's hair away from her forehead and palmed her cheek. She was drenched in sweat. A very fucking bad sign in below freezing temperatures. "Why do you need her to? What good can that—"

"I need to know if her lung is punctured," Misty snapped, "before I take out the thing that's plugging the hole!"

Nat grimaced, adjusting her grip on the handle. Jackie's heart thudded too fast. It had only reached this speed, hummingbird flutters that stung her ribcage, once before. Lottie and Van pale, desperate, begging. Shauna dying. Jackie too sick to go to her, even if they'd have let her. A knife dragging through her skin.

"No," Jackie muttered. "No, no. That's—no—she—that can't—there isn't—we'd know if— no."

"How will I know?" Shauna gripped Jackie's thigh tight. "If it is?"

"It isn't." Jackie shook her head slowly, dazed. "It isn't. It's your shoulder. It isn't."

It couldn't be. Shauna couldn't be that injured. It was just some blood. A deep flesh wound, something that'd need antibiotics, that was all—not penicillin, because she was allergic to that, so one of the other ones, the ones that they say don't take any longer to work, but really do—and they would give Shauna a stomach ache. That was it. Jackie was just going to have to get her out of the stupid fucking woods that they had no business being in anyway and take her to the emergency room and hold her hand while they cleaned it out and watch the nurse carefully, so that she could change the bandages at home for her. And then she'd just have to take her home to literally anywhere— one of Lottie's vacation homes or a

new apartment or a way too expensive hotel that she'd put on her credit card and think about later—and make her ginger tea and force her to take the stupid fucking antibiotics, even though they make her feel sick, and protect her from everything else in this shitty fucking bullshit world because they just got each other back. Jackie just got Shauna back. She wasn't going to lose her.

So no, this wasn't a punctured lung.

"Jackie?" Nat snapped in front of her face. She jumped. "Did you get that?"

"I—I'm sorry, I—no."

"It's okay, just—"

"It's not quite okay," Misty interjected firmly. "I need you to keep up. Hold her upright, I can't have her falling forward. I don't think this is a punctured lung, but we have to rule out the worst case scenario. Basic triage."

Shauna's eyes were shut, but they weren't squeezed tight. Her skin was pale, like it had been whenever she got the flu, when her mom told her that she was getting remarried, when Jackie told her that she was going to sleep with Jeff.

"Shauna?" Jackie took her shoulders and felt her relax too much into her grip. Her hands remained where Jackie had moved them, splayed across her thigh. "Shauna? Shauna!"

Misty's eyes widened behind her oversized frames. "Did she pass out?"

"No," Shauna managed to grunt out. "Think I'm gonna, though."

"Stay awake, baby," Jackie begged, her words thick and desperate. "Stay awake, okay? You can do it. You can—"

Footsteps thudded toward them. Everyone but Shauna jerked their gaze toward the noise. Van, Tai, and Lottie were back, supplies in hand. They must've sprinted—flushed faces, gasping for breath.

"Thank fuck," Nat muttered under her breath.

"Perfect." Misty let out a sigh of relief that told Jackie just how unsure she'd been a minute ago. "Okay, Jackie, are you listening?"

Shauna swayed and Nat and Misty moved with her, terror written plainly on their faces. Jackie gripped her tighter.

"Yes! Yes, I'm listening."

"We're going to lay her down on your lap. Van, Tai—drop that stuff and take her arms. Gently."

They did. Both so clearly sick to their stomachs, Tai from fear and Van from the gore, they each took one of Shauna's biceps.

"Lottie, find me the type of bandage that looks like plastic wrap and as much gauze as you can. Scissors, too. We'll have to cut these clothes off," Misty directed. Lottie nodded and began shuffling through the pouches. "Nat, do you have the spear if I let go?"

Nat slid one hand lower, covering Misty's hold. "Yeah, I got it."

Jackie held her breath as Misty released her grip. Nat held steady. Steadier than was humanly possible, so steady Jackie could kiss her. Misty took Shauna's waist from behind.

"Jackie, let go of her and—"

"No!" Jackie and Shauna insisted in tandem.

Shauna was still conscious. Good. That was good. That was—

"For a second," Misty clarified. "We've got her. I need you to sit down and turn sideways. Put your legs out in front of you so we can lower her upper body into your lap. I want her head slightly elevated and the wound further from all this debris."

She jerked her head toward the ground, loose clumps of dirt and pebbles and dead leaves scattered around them. More traps. More seemingly harmless things to be afraid of.

"Okay," Jackie agreed tentatively, because what other fucking options did she have? "Okay, Shauna, they've got you."

Jackie let go slowly and Shauna grunted in protest, the same way she might if Jackie pulled the covers off of her in the morning or rolled onto her other side in the night. As soon as she had enough distance between them, Jackie moved her body exactly how Misty had told her to.

"Lottie, lay that blanket—yeah, the thermal one—lay that across Jackie's lap."

Jackie took one edge, tucking it beneath her outer thigh, and helped Lottie spread the blanket as close to Shauna as possible without disturbing her, creating a thin barrier between where they'd lay her and the earth beneath them.

"I'll count one, two, three, go and we'll lower her down slowly," Misty instructed. "Jackie, guide her face away from the injury, toward your body, once we get her down. I want her to have an unobstructed pocket of air. Got it?"

"Got it."

Jackie held her breath again as they moved in unison, Lottie hovering anxiously with supplies in hand, and she didn't let it out until Shauna was secure in her lap. Shauna whimpered and, as if on cue, a snowflake landed on her hair, the bright white of it stark against her dark brunette locks. Jackie brushed it away, letting it melt against the heat of her hand, and cradled Shauna's head carefully.

"Alright," Misty shoved her glasses up, "let's see what we're working with here, shall we?"

30. you will be okay

December 29th, 2021

Jackie inspected everything that Misty pumped into Shauna. She checked the vials for tampering and did her best to remember if Rachel had ever mentioned the drugs in passing during one of her work stories—epinephrine, that was something they used when people were dying. Jackie knew that, but she couldn't remember why exactly. Like epi-pen, but how was a stab wound akin to an allergic reaction? Misty had said something about Shauna's blood pressure being too low and it isn't a big dose, it's just a little boost, and then she'd snatched the vial out of Jackie's hand and pushed it into the IV she'd put in the back of Shauna's.

Shauna had jolted awake like Pulp Fiction (maybe not quite that big of a jolt, more of a little jump and a whimper and a burrowing of her pink nose into Jackie's chest and fuck—was that where Jackie actually knew the drug from?) and then Misty had made Jackie force so much water down her throat, with salt shaken in—because of electrolytes, Jackie knew that much—that Shauna had sobbed. She'd cried and batted Jackie's hand away weakly and shook her head and tried to go back to sleep, and Jackie had kept her awake and kept her drinking and kept her alive.

Everything was wrapped carefully. The bleeding had stopped after what'd felt like hours of Misty holding pressure, with Shauna face down in Jackie's lap, whimpering into her thighs, until she was stable enough for them to bring her back to the cabin. The moment they'd made it back, it'd been a frantic blur of gauze pads and stretchy brown bandaging that stuck to itself like cling wrap and white tape that pulled at the hairs at the nape of Shauna's neck when Misty wasn't careful enough about placement.

Taissa and Natalie had held Shauna upright for Jackie while she'd carefully buttoned a flannel over her, guiding her left arm into the sleeve and leaving her right out and accessible. The shirt crossed her chest at an awkward diagonal, its collar sitting under her armpit and the buttons only half done. It drove Jackie crazy, not being able to straighten her out properly, but it'd been a compromise. Misty had wanted to leave her topless. To simply drape a blanket over her, so that they'd have easy access if they needed it. Jackie had let a primal shriek of dissent rip through the cabin, and that had been the end of that argument.

So, the flannel. Not perfect, but something.

Everything had just fallen still. Shauna was propped up carefully with pillows, enough medication flowing through her veins to lull her into a sound sleep. She no longer wore a pinched grimace—her features were soft and relaxed. She was okay.

Jackie sat at the head of the bed beside her, watching her chest rise and fall evenly. Taissa was cross-legged at her feet, smoothing the blankets over her calves compulsively. Van had herded Lottie into the main room at some point, guiding her away from the chaos when she'd covered her ears and cried out. Jackie would have to think about her— worry about her—later. All that mattered right now was Shauna.

Misty and Nat hovered halfway between the doorway and the bed, unsure whether to relinquish their duties just yet.

"Well," Misty sighed with an air of finality, "she'll definitely need some intensive physical therapy to recover full range of motion. Tricky spot for a wound like that."

How?

How was this Jackie's life? How was this even fucking happening?

How was Misty Quigley discussing long-term recovery, like this was a real hospital with real doctors and real treatment? There was no x-ray machine. No MRI to assess tissue damage, or… whatever the fuck it was that an MRI did.

There was only them.

Jackie stroking Shauna's hair, her hand shaking so violently she missed her target every few passes. Shauna, pale and unconscious, laid out not on a motorized hospital bed, but on an Ikea bed frame. (It was painted to look older and more worn, but Jackie Taylor had moved too many times not to know a goddamn Neiden frame with the Luroy slats that came separate, for some astoundingly stupid, totally incomprehensible reason, because what kind of person needs a bed frame without anything to hold the fucking mattress up?)

"Right," Jackie laughed sharply.

The bitter ring of it startled the other women. Tai twitched and shifted uncomfortably, her thumb dancing back and forth across the navy duvet a little faster. Nat worried her lip and frowned, her entire face folding in distress. Misty gaped at Jackie. She lifted her left foot to step toward them, but planted it back beside her right at the last second, going almost bow-legged with the uncomfortably perfect alignment.

Jackie's laughter choked her as it shifted to tears. She spoke around the thickness of them. "Physical therapy. And should I book that with you now or at the front desk on the way out?"

The twitch of a sympathetic smile pulled at Nat's lips, but it was gone as quickly as it'd come.

"Really, what the fuck? What—" Jackie hiccuped weakly. "What the fuck? What am I supposed to even… even do with that? Physical therapy? Misty, she's—she's—what the fuck!"

Misty blinked back at her, confused, as though Jackie might yet whip out her planner and slot in the Monday, Wednesday, Friday appointments right then, and by the way, could they book afternoons? Because neither of them were morning people and Shauna got grumpy enough when Jackie drove them as it was.

"That's a good thing, of course," Misty clarified in a rush of breath. She bared her teeth in a forced smile. "She's going to be okay. I'm just prepping you for what you're up against. Obviously without imaging it isn't certain, but with the placement of the wound and the way it's torn through the muscle, she might have difficulty with even very basic tasks on that side."

"Misty," Nat warned. She took her by the elbow, backing her toward the door slowly.

Misty shuffled backwards in tiny increments, refusing to take any true steps away from them. “But that’s a good thing, because I wouldn’t be talking about the future if she didn’t have one!” she said brightly. “And now I’m certain she does!”

“Fuck, alright,” Tai pulled herself to her feet and crossed the room in long, graceful strides. She came to a stop in front of Misty, pressing a hand to the front of her shoulder to help Natalie with the backward momentum. “Enough. Let’s give them a fucking second to handle right now, before we start in on the long-term.”

Everything was static. Nat mumbled something, but Jackie could only make out the low rasp of her voice—the waves of sound that she would recognize anywhere, but not the language carried on them. The only thing that Jackie could hear clearly was the thudding pressure of her heart in her ears. She locked her eyes on Shauna’s full rosy lips, chapped and parted just a centimeter, unsure that she’d even be able to hear her if she cried out.

“Now you’re— now you’re certain she—now—” Jackie sputtered. “You—you weren’t sure if—was she almost—did she almost—”

She cried too hard for words. Pain shot through her chest. Nat and Tai released Misty to move toward her like one entity, Nat crouching beside her and laying a hand on her knee while Tai wrapped her arms around her shoulders.

Jackie was sobbing and Shauna was still sleeping. Jackie watched her carefully, peeking above the sleeve of Taissa’s wool sweater through blurry tears. She couldn’t shake how terrifying it was to watch Shauna not react. She’d always always woken when Jackie cried, no matter how slight—a gasp, a whimper, a shuddering breath. It didn’t matter.

Certainly a wail like this.

But Shauna didn’t budge. Her long lashes were fixed in place, resting against her cheekbones without so much as a flutter. Pain meds, Jackie had been assured. They’d keep her drowsy and still while she was healing. Her blood pressure had gone up enough to tolerate them, so Jackie had nodded her consent for Misty to load her up. Jackie didn’t want Shauna to have to feel another moment of pain, but seeing her so unrousable while Misty prattled on, making it painfully clear how much of a near-miss it’d been, was crushing her.

Nat’s gentle fingers ran back and forth above Jackie’s knee and Taissa had somehow managed, even out here, to smell like warm soothing amber. She pressed her cheek against Jackie’s from behind.

Jackie needed them out.

She couldn’t let herself relax into them, to give up control and share the burden. Relaxing meant trusting the others to pick up the slack and Jackie wouldn’t do that. Not with this. Not with Shauna. She was a fucking hypocrite. She knew that. She’d known it even as she’d preached the wisdom of trusting each other and loving each other and working together. Because when it came down to it, when Jackie admitted the real truth to herself, she had always and would always be willing to sacrifice anything for Shauna. She loved them all, but she had one priority.

Shauna was hers and hers alone. To care for and protect and understand. Jackie would gladly and gratefully accept the others’ help—she needed their help; she couldn’t keep watch

like Natalie or give medical treatment like Misty or problem solve like Taissa—but Jackie wouldn't drop any of the responsibility into their hands.

It was hers.

"I'm okay," Jackie forced out. "I'm okay."

"Are you sure you—" Tai started, loosening her grip but holding Jackie all the same.

"Yes." Jackie pulled away gently and Taissa relented, standing and brushing her palms against her jeans. "Just—can we have some time? I want… I want her to rest and I… I just want some time."

Natalie squeezed Jackie's thigh before rising. "We're right outside," she said firmly. "You call us, we're here."

Jackie nodded and they retreated to the main room, Nat's arm slung around Misty to guide her away. Taissa was the last out. She gave Jackie one final look before clicking the door shut. A look that Jackie had known for as long as she'd known Taissa— I've got you.

Silence washed over them. Not artificial quiet like before, when Jackie had temporarily lost her sense, but true stillness, proven to her by the blissful cadence of Shauna's breaths. Jackie swallowed down the last of her tears.

She took Shauna's left hand in both of hers, shifting it to rest on her own thigh. Her fingers cradled Shauna's palm and her thumbs smoothed over the back of her hand. The opal ring had made it to this hand at some point, filling the space that Shauna's wedding band had when Jackie had first presented her with it, far too fucking early in their relationship to be considered any sort of sane.

("Jackie, you put a ring on her finger!" Van had snapped, when Jackie'd tried to brush it off. "Not just any ring, the ring! You might as well have taken her wedding band off—y'know, the one Jeff fuckface Sadecki gave her, because you seem to have forgotten that she married that sack of stupid—and gotten down on one knee.")

And… yeah.

That had sort of been the point. Jackie hadn't admitted it consciously. She hadn't told herself that she was marking Shauna as hers or sealing them together, welding the cracks in their foundation with kisses and I love yous and a band of gold. But she'd known, deep down, what she was doing. Of course she had. She'd known three days in that she wanted to whisk Shauna away. To collect Callie and tell Jeff to nosedive off of a cliff. To buy them a home and spend the rest of her days making sure that Shauna was fucking loved and cared for in every sense of the word. To pay the bills for her. Make the world gentler for her. Get on her knees for her.

Jackie had wanted to put a ring on it that fucking early. Because it wasn't early; it was late.

They should've done this when they were twenty.

They should've gone through hell and back together and come out stronger for it. They should've stood under stars so bright they could illuminate your path—the only beautiful thing about out there that Jackie actually missed sometimes—and converted the doomcoming decorations into wedding decor. Lottie should've announced them wives and given one of

those long speeches that you could never quite tell if you were meant to be hearing. Mari should've made them a cheeky "cake" out of neatly stacked pine needles and given them shit for crying and— alive.

Mari should be alive. She should be messaging them on fucking Facebook from her house in the suburbs to try and hock them Herbalife supplements, only for Shauna to send her a long tirade about the evils of MLMs in response.

They should all be alive.

Jackie never should've made that header. They should've lost states. Jackie should've given the team a pep talk, until at least half of them cracked proud smiles for a well-fought season, and cried into the crook of Shauna's neck the moment they were alone together.

They should've fought it out.

Shauna should've gone to Brown, carrying Jackie's embarrassingly speedy forgiveness with her, a much better token than the fucking necklace. She should've called Jackie when she found out that she needed an abortion. Jackie should've held her hand through the procedure—under conscious sedation instead of wire.

They should've made up.

They should've grown back together, all their deepest darkest pieces—still the shade of girls who hadn't done the unthinkable, who were just a little fucked and not psychiatry journal fodder— laid out on the floor between them, until they could slot them back together the right way. They should've fucked and danced and laughed and cried and lived long, beautiful lives together.

They should've had a chance.

Jackie's mind hadn't fully wandered into the what ifs until now—until Shauna was almost taken from her for good—because it hurt too fucking bad and because there were girls who belonged to them, who wouldn't be in their lives without all the pain of being apart. But it was fucking fantasy, so who the hell cared about the veracity of the details? Jackie could pretend that they'd have been there too—Sadie calling to say hi, while Callie sat at the breakfast table with Jackie and Shauna ran around getting ready for work, because Shauna would've been the one to work and Jackie would've been the one to stay home with the ki—

Well.

Jackie would've stayed home.

Shauna would've been happier working and Jackie had never much had a care in the world, other than loving and being loved by Shauna. They would've figured it out. Jackie knew that. If anything had gone differently. If Jackie hadn't read the fucking journal. If Shauna had said I'm sorry. Hell, if she'd said I love you, but I'm not sorry. If Lottie'd had a limitless supply of psych meds or Laura Lee there and alive, to hold her hand. If Van hadn't been torn to pieces by sharp teeth, sewn back together by a needle threaded with her belief in Lottie. If Nat had come home sooner, Javi and Travis her lost boys in tow, and found Jackie before they could whisk her away.

If Jackie had been given any indication that Shauna wanted her in any way, they would've been okay.

Jackie would've stood there and been her goddamn maid of honor while she married Jeff fucking Sadecki if she'd had to. She would've helped her raise Callie, fixing her hair into pigtails and putting bandages on skinned knees and carting her to basketball and piano and whatever else her little heart desired. And eventually, Jackie knew, if she and Shauna had just been in each other's orbits, they would've landed on their feet. Together.

One of them would've gotten brave and they would've sunk into each other and maybe they'd have ruined lives and marriages along the way but that wouldn't have mattered, because they would've had what they'd always wanted.

They should've been married, was the point.

Twenty fucking years ago, they should've been married.

So Jackie hadn't been early in the impulse to slip a ring on Shauna's finger. She'd been late.

Shauna hadn't needed to go a deep, flushed red when Jackie'd first touched the ring in its new home— christening it, her eyes wide with awe. And Shauna hadn't needed to mutter a weak excuse— felt weird not having anything there, I guess.

Because all that Jackie felt when she saw the very ring that she'd imagined proposing to Shauna with in her most shrouded fantasies— years ago, when the impossibility of it had felt insurmountable —on that finger, was relief.

But relief had always been short-lived for them.

Shauna groaned in her sleep, shifting before Jackie could still her. Red stained the white of her bandage. Jackie pressed her palm against it and Shauna grunted in pain.

"Misty!"

"I want to take her to a fucking hospital!" Jackie's voice filtered in and roused Shauna. "That's what I want!"

Her shoulder was throbbing, a heightened version of the pain she'd been feeling for weeks —she couldn't reckon with the coincidence of that yet. She pushed it away, to be dealt with and wondered about when everything wasn't hinging on the brink of crazy already. There was no room for mysticism. Not beyond the blood she'd already drawn, knife-pricks to their palms like it was 1996 and they were little girls howling under the moon.

But even the blood spilt had been pennies of insanity for pounds of reality. A few drops of the unnecessary and ungrounded, sure, but it'd been dwarfed by a wide swath of more mundane bloodshed— torture and death and the circle of life. Whether it played out under a higher power or not was irrelevant.

Shit.

She was groggy with downers. The haze of it was uncomfortably familiar. Padded restraints on her wrists in her twenties, because binding her hands to the hospital bed was somehow kinder when the cuffs were plush and baby blue. A bevy of prescriptions that psychiatrists wouldn't dare deny her in her thirties, not with her sob story or her troubled past. Pills swiped from Mrs. Taylor's medicine cabinet in her forties, just because she could.

She didn't like taking them.

Not how they were meant to be taken, at least. They made Jackie quieter. (No. They made her hallucinations of Jackie quieter, because Jackie wasn't frozen at nineteen, haunting Shauna from beyond the veil. She was forty-four, just like Shauna would be in a few weeks, and warm and gentle and real.) But Shauna liked having the pills for the times that she needed them. Not to pop one with her wine and take the edge off—the way Jeff did when he swiped from her supply, always chasing comfort and ease— but to swallow a small handful dry and exist in that liminal, tortuous space. To ride the line between too much and way too much. To get close to death without allowing herself to die. To feel sick and dehydrated and afraid, the way she had when she'd first lost Jackie.

Shauna forced her eyes open.

Back in the cabin.

Fuck, they must've carried her back, because she would've remembered the nightmare of walking there. She was laid half on her back and half on her side, a strange forty-five degree angle, reinforced with more pillows than Shauna had even realized were in the cabin. Every limb was adjusted carefully, her injured shoulder and arm supported and cradled by blankets wrapped strategically around them.

She was alone in the bedroom. The door wasn't shut completely—a six-inch gap let the noise of the main room pass through unimpeded. Jackie had realized that Shauna needed that, catching on quickly to the way that Shauna refused to shut the door all the way, on the rare occasions that she showered alone or got out of bed before Jackie. Jackie had adopted the habit herself without comment.

"I understand," Misty said firmly. "But we took extras from that pharmacy, in case of something like this. She doesn't need surgery or a transfusion. She's okay. They wouldn't do anything more for her in a hospital than we can here and I already told you—it looks scary, but she's stable. And getting her out isn't exactly possible."

Shauna parted her lips in a false start. Her throat stung so sharply she slammed them shut immediately. She wasn't sure if she could talk at all, let alone call out to Jackie. Her heart picked up speed.

"I think she's right, Jackie." Taissa's voice was so soft it barely broke a whisper, but Shauna was used to listening for her. "It's way more dangerous to try and get her out right now. Maybe tomorrow, if things are looking… less difficult."

"Van?" Jackie sobbed. Ragged and desperate, the most worry Shauna had ever heard in her voice.

Shauna tried to sit up—maybe walking to Jackie would be better than forcing words out. But no, her entire body protested. Sharp pains radiated from her head to her toes with no

discernable source, like her nerves themselves had caught fire.

She heard Van's heavy boots as she crossed the floor, moving closer to Jackie. "Okay, c'mere," Van soothed. "I know you're scared. I know. But she's okay, Jack. This is the safest place for her right now."

"I can't do this," Jackie's cries were slightly muffled. Shauna could see her in her mind's eye, her face buried in Van's shoulder and her slight body shaking. "I can't lose her, I won't—I won't be able to—I can't."

Shauna forced her mouth open and it fucking hurt, but she couldn't listen to Jackie suffer like this. She was okay. They were okay. Jackie needed reminding and—Shauna got a small hit of exhilaration from this— she was the only one who could make Jackie feel better. The only one who could calm her.

"Jackie," she croaked. "Jax, come here."

The door flung all the way open. Jackie was there in a second, crouching beside the bed. Misty lingered in the doorway, peering in. Shauna patted the spot beside her with her good hand.

"No." Jackie swallowed, shaking her head. She inhaled once, controlled and precise, and stopped the flow of tears. "No, I don't wanna move you, it's—"

"Sit with me." Shauna frowned. "Please."

Jackie looked over her shoulder. "Misty, is—is that okay? Can she move okay or do we need to—"

"Any movement that doesn't cause sharp pain is alright," Misty confirmed briskly. 'But Shauna,' she caught Shauna's eye and gave her a firm look, one that reminded Shauna so much of her mother it sent a chill through her spine, "your right arm needs to stay supported."

"Couldn't move it if I wanted." Shauna tried to laugh, but it came out dry and rough, more cough than chuckle. "Thanks, Misty. I'm fine."

Misty nodded and stepped away, rejoining the group. Shauna could tell by the way she kept one ear toward the bedroom that she was still listening keenly.

"Shut the door," Shauna said softly.

Jackie opened her mouth to speak, but Shauna fell into another fit of sputtering coughs before she got the chance, each one sending pain through her like a knife, as she slid toward the wall to make room for Jackie. She tried to stop her face from twisting, but Jackie's wide eyes told her she'd failed miserably.

"Water," Jackie muttered, launching herself up to find the bottle. "You need water. Are you sitting up enough to drink? I might need help to move you without hurting your—"

"I can drink like this." Shauna held her hand out and Jackie passed her the unscrewed water bottle, just as she had the night before. "The door, Jackie."

Jackie shut it, watching as Shauna swallowed down the water. The cold soothed her throat until the scratch was near gone. Jackie took it from her and finally sat, facing her the best she

could with her legs still hanging off the side of the bed. Doing her best not to disturb her—the way Shauna had perched herself on her bubbe's hospital bed when she was sick, terrified that her presence alone was evil enough to push her over the edge to death.

Jackie wasn't scared of that, of course. She was scared to jostle Shauna. To cause her pain, even though Shauna probably fucking deserved the sting of it. Jackie knew that she had slaughtered girls, and she was still unwilling to risk causing Shauna a moment of physical discomfort.

"How are you feeling?" Jackie asked gently.

She looked at Shauna with such love it made her nauseous. Jackie Taylor was a good fucking person. She'd been through hell and back and she'd stayed sweet and kind and loving. She cared more about Shauna's daughter, after knowing her for less than a month, than Shauna had managed to in sixteen years. She deserved so much better.

Shauna was trapping her. She knew she was. It was fucked, the way she'd harnessed Jackie's guilt to keep her. Told her what? That she didn't have an option to leave her? The natural conclusion to that fucking sentiment was a threat.

Shauna had threatened her into a relationship. She was like one of those evil men you see on Dateline, telling Jackie that she wasn't allowed out of her sight. But she couldn't force herself to let her go, no matter how much she knew that was the right thing to do. She couldn't even force herself to feel guilty about it, because she'd spent her entire life wanting her and now she had her and that was the point of everything.

Her feelings must've been written in her expression, because Jackie was melting down in front of her.

"Oh, love," Jackie soothed. She smoothed Shauna's hair back gently with one hand, resting the other on Shauna's good arm. "You're really hurting, aren't you? I can go wrestle Misty for some more pain meds, if you—"

"No," Shauna took Jackie's hand in her own and Jackie twitched, distressed. "Baby, I can move. It's okay."

Jackie nodded, tears welling in her doe-eyes.

"Come here." Shauna tilted her chin up and lifted her head slightly off of the pillow.

Pain lanced through her neck, but it softened when Jackie's lips met hers. Jackie wound the hand she'd been running through Shauna's hair to the base of her skull, supporting her like she could sense the sting. Jackie broke the kiss quickly, but she lingered with her nose brushing Shauna's long enough for Shauna to feel the salt of her tears settle into a scrape that she hadn't yet noticed, likely earned from her face first fall into the brush.

She should've been paying more attention. She'd underestimated these freaks. It could've been Jackie injured.

Jackie dead.

"Do you still have a gun?" Shauna asked abruptly.

Jackie pulled back to stare down at her. "Yeah, but—"

“Good,” Shauna interrupted. “I feel fine. I’ve felt way fucking worse than this and been perfectly fine, so I don’t want you to panic, okay? But we have to talk about worst case scenarios, because you never know when—”

“What? Why? What worst case?” Jackie squeezed her hand tight, a vice grip of pressure that Shauna knew she didn’t realize she was using, because she’d been laser-focused on treating Shauna like something delicate. Fear had taken over. “Are you feeling faint again? Do you need Misty?”

“No!”

Shauna couldn’t have Misty fucking Quigley barging in. They needed to have this conversation. She needed to make sure that Jackie understood.

“No. Jackie, I’m okay. I’m in a little pain but I’m fine. I just… well, I know that things can go south really… suddenly. And I’ve… I’ve tried to shelter you from this shit,” Shauna said quietly. Jackie’s grip slackened ever so slightly. Her brows unfurrowed, confusion overtaking fear. “I… I don’t think about it myself, really. I’ve blocked so much of it out, but it’s all… bubbling up, now that we’re out here.”

“God, I’m so fucking sorry, Shauna.” Jackie pitched forward to press her lips against Shauna’s forehead. “I didn’t mean to—”

“You were right,” Shauna said quickly. Jackie pulled back enough to look her in the eyes, but she kept her free hand against Shauna’s cheek, smoothing her thumb back and forth gently. “You were right to ask. To make sure we’re… that we can feel something. But all of this coming to the surface is… unpredictable. I’m sure I’ll be fine, but… I’ve already passed out on you once. I’ve left you alone with them once and we have to be prepared for the fact that I might—”

“Shauna, stop! Just stop it. You’re fine.” Sobs muffled Jackie’s words.

“Shhhh,” Shauna hushed her frantically. “Shhh, shhh, shhh, Jax. Quiet, sweetie, quiet. Please.”

“You’re okay,” Jackie whisper-yelled. “You’re gonna be okay, so don’t you dare talk to me like you’re not!”

“Baby, I said don’t panic. It’s not—”

“Well, excuse me for panicking when the love of my fucking life is talking to me like she’s on her literal death bed in the middle of the fucking woods!” Jackie’s face was set with the illusion of anger, but her trembling lower lip gave her away. “It’s not an option, Shauna. You will be okay.”

“Okay, you’re right! You’re right, Jax. I’m gonna be okay.” Shauna brought Jackie’s hand to her lips, pressing a slow kiss to the back of it. Jackie’s breaths shifted slightly slower, slightly deeper. “But… I need you to let me talk to you about this. I can’t focus on getting better, if I don’t know that you’re taken care of. Okay?”

“Okay,” Jackie acquiesced. She pressed her lips together hard, trying to physically keep the words in, but her success was short-lived. “I just don’t see why you’re—” Shauna pressed Jackie’s hand to her chest, begging with her eyes. “Fuck. Okay, I’m listening.”

Shauna nodded, exhaling gratefully. “You don’t go anywhere alone with Lottie, okay? With any of them, really.”

“What are you—”

“I know you trust them. I know you trust her and Van, but—Jackie, they can’t always… control themselves, alright?”

Shauna tried to sit up higher instinctually, to make Jackie understand how serious she was. Pain immobilized her, which was the exact fucking problem. Even if she was alive, she was next to fucking useless and she knew what could happen with incapacitation like this. Jackie hadn’t seen it, not with her own eyes. She didn’t have the hazy memories seeping back in, becoming clearer with every passing moment.

She did, Shauna was sure, of whatever she’d endured out there. But not of what they’d done. Not of what this cult was trying to recreate. Of what was set up all around them, immersing them in that existence like their own fucked up version of colonial Williamsburg, except the activity list wouldn’t include anything near as wholesome as churning butter.

“If any of the others say anything weird, if they try and get you to go anywhere, if you get a bad feeling, just—you don’t do it.”

Jackie scrubbed her free hand over her eyes. Her fingers shook. Her nails were grown out, the gray polish that’d been perfect, much like the rest of her, when she’d first come to the house was nearly chipped off. The rings she’d worn had long been abandoned. There was a small, careful cut on her palm— intentional, like the ones that Shauna had begged the others to make. Except Jackie must’ve done this one on her own.

She was both part of it and not. Aware and not.

“Shauna, I think you’re… freaking out a little. You’ve—you’ve been through way too much, too fast. I think it’s… messing with you a little, baby,” Jackie said carefully. She brushed Shauna’s hair back, leaving her hand to rest on the pillow next to Shauna’s head when she was done. “I’m aware around them, all the time. I’m careful. I don’t trust them blindly, but you’re starting to sound a little…”

“Paranoid?” Shauna laughed sharply and shut her eyes to block out Jackie’s worry. ‘Yeah, I’m fucking paranoid.’ Jackie tugged a strand of her hair twice, so gently that Shauna barely noticed. She opened her eyes for her. “This is too much. But it is for them, too. They’re probably feeling just as paranoid. There’s a reason we’re alive and the others aren’t.”

Shauna paused.

Jackie’s nose twitched. She nodded.

“Don’t take anything from them. We have food and clothes in our pack, you use those. You don’t accept anything that anyone gives you, do you understand me?”

“Yes,” Jackie agreed softly.

“If they… lose it, they’re not them anymore. They’re not—they won’t—it doesn’t matter how much they love you,” Shauna said quietly. “You have to promise me, okay? Anything weird and you leave. You feel backed into a corner, you fucking shoot.”

Jackie took a few deep breaths. “I promise, Shauna.”

“If you feel like you need help— if they’ve gone… off the deep end—you go to Natalie. You and Nat can get out if you have to.”

“Okay,” Jackie said softly. She took Shauna’s cheeks between her hands and Shauna relaxed, the crushing weight lifting from her chest. “I get it. I understand, alright? So… so you can just worry about getting better now.”

Her face had fallen neutral, back to the expression that Shauna hadn’t understood until far too late, the one that Jackie saved for her alone—her pupils just a little blown and her brows just a little lifted. Pure fucking love. Shauna would worry about becoming someone who deserved it later.

For now, she just drank it in.

December 30th, 2021

“It’s a bad fucking plan,” Nat said, for the fifth or sixth time, bracing herself in the doorway with outstretched arms.

She should’ve appeared even shorter in comparison to the door, the top of which Jackie wasn’t even sure she could brush with her fingertips, without going on tiptoe. But Nat managed to look taller, somehow. Always a master of stretching herself to fill empty space, even when it was uncomfortable. She leaned toward Jackie and Shauna, as though could physically bridge the gap between in here and out there.

In here being the bedroom, where Shauna was settled extremely carefully against Jackie’s chest—her good shoulder pressed against Jackie’s sternum—

(“Are you sure I’m not too heavy? Because I can—”

“We’ve been over this, baby. I’m not a twig that’s gonna snap. Please, Shauna, just lay down?”)

—and the top of her head tucked under Jackie’s chin. In here, where Taissa and Van sat on the floor, leaning against the wall with their legs kicked out in front of them—touching always, more so than they’d say they did if you asked them, often passively and unconsciously, because they were “grown ups, unlike you two”— thigh to thigh, knee to knee, ankle to ankle.

Out there being the main room, where Misty and Lottie huddled together in front of the fire, more buddy-buddy than Jackie would’ve preferred, and Natalie paced, scuffing the wooden flooring with the oiled-black rubber soles of her boots each time she turned on her heel too sharply.

She resumed her post, releasing her grip on the doorframe before anyone could even respond to her.

“It’s barely even a plan yet!” Misty called. “So the judgment is a bit premature, Natalie.”

Jackie couldn't see Misty from where she lay, her vision blocked by the angle of the wall, yeah, but even more so by the dark hair that tickled her chin and pulled toward her nose when she inhaled deep. Shauna was out of the woods— pun not intended, Misty had chimed to absolutely no laughs from her live studio audience of disgruntled, exhausted women—but Jackie wasn't ready to look beyond her…

Well, just her, yet.

Every inch of her, from the gentle curls of her hair, to her lips—already starting to go smoother, thanks to Jackie's fervent chapstick application—to the angry red skin beneath her bandage, a gash that Jackie had seen when she'd helped Misty exchange the soaked gauze for fresh— see, that's the muscle, the part where it goes deep like that, but the skin is already trying to close around the edges here because of the steri-strips we used to secure it —to her hips, which Jackie had held carefully to balance her as she'd peed over a bucket, when she couldn't walk all the way to the front door and down the porch steps— so much talk of pee in this relationship, Shauna had murmured, drugged and doped and half-asleep, who would've guessed —to her feet that bounced anxiously under the thick comforter—Shauna ready to run as always, even when her body wouldn't let her.

Then better images.

Shauna healed completely, tossing a real, hospital-grade sling into the trash, wrapping her arms around Jackie's neck, grinning huge and pretty and—

"Jackie?" Shauna's voice was small and soft. Jackie twitched, gripping her waist tighter reflexively. "What do you think?"

Fuck.

Jackie couldn't be doing this.

She couldn't be slipping into this—her own version of dissociation, nowhere near as extreme as Shauna's, but even longer established, sparked first by a simple daydream. A mental image of herself pushing Shauna on their favorite bright yellow swing (when reality had been her mother brushing her hair violently, the first time that Jackie had known that it was meant to hurt). The mental retreats had evolved as Jackie did. Shauna lifting her into her arms bridal style in the pool, because the water made her weightless (her mother kicking the scale back under the bathroom sink and clicking her tongue). Shauna nuzzling into her neck, planting tentative kisses on her skin (Jeff yanking on her blouse so aggressively he ripped two buttons clean off). Shauna patting her lap to beckon her to it, holding her arms open for her (Jackie having a panic attack on the floor of a fitting room, too small and too hot and too public, years after the last time she'd even seen Shauna at all).

Jackie couldn't be going there, when she had Shauna right in front of her. Needing her. Depending on her.

Jackie shook her head quickly to clear it. "Sorry." She let herself press one kiss to the crown of Shauna's head, coaxing herself back into reality. "I, uh, missed the question. What do I think about what?"

Van frowned at Jackie, her concern glaringly evident. What Jackie had been doing wasn't lost on her—it never had been. Tai clucked her tongue impatiently. Not unkindly, just in her

signature frustration with being held back by a wait for others' opinions, when she was confident that she could handle the decision making perfectly well on her own.

Shauna brushed her fingers against Jackie's clumsily where they lay, still pressed to Shauna's waist. Her wrist twitched at the last second and her hand slipped. She cursed under her breath. Jackie caught her hand and guided it to rest against her stomach, a more neutral position for her shoulder.

"Do you still think we can take them?" Shauna prompted slowly, each word clear and careful.

"I don't know," Jackie muttered without thought. She pressed her lips closed, sealing the rest of her worry in— I don't know if we can take them, I don't know if we'll survive this, I wish you'd just have let them kill me, because then you'd be safe and that's all that fucking matters.

"We're down Shauna," Tai said. Her forced calm tone told Jackie that she was being made to repeat herself for her benefit. "In case you guys haven't noticed, we very much need her when it comes to this shit."

"But that's the problem with trying to leave, too." Nat stopped in the doorway again, pausing long enough to face Taissa as she spoke. "We can't fight our way out, without Shauna actually being useful."

"Wow." Jackie heard the eye roll in Shauna's voice. "Thanks, Nat."

"I don't have time to be cute with the phrasing." Nat shrugged. "Not only can Shauna not fight, she's a fucking liability. She can't even walk reliably."

"I can walk!" Shauna insisted. Jackie sighed softly. 'I can,' Shauna repeated, weaker. "Not very fast, maybe, but… I can fucking walk."

Nat shook her head, her dark hair whipping against her cheeks. "We're fucked leaving and we're fucked staying here. What we should do is go as far in the opposite direction of their path in as we can, build a shelter to camouflage ourselves, and hide out for a few days. Y'know, until their excitement dies down and they fuck back off to their moms' basements or whatever."

"I don't think they're the mom's basement types." Misty appeared behind Natalie's shoulder, peeking over it to survey the rest of them. "I wish they were, because then they wouldn't actually go to all this trouble. It'd be too much work. They're more like the… mmm… new age spiritual types. I bet a bunch of them live together, in some sort of group commune or—"

"I don't think it matters where our little Heaven's Gate freaks live," Van interjected. "Who cares if they're going back to mom and dad's sad-sack in-law unit or a utopian field of dreams, they're here now. And I can't see them turning around and packing this shit up, just because we aren't waiting for them wrapped in a bow. We've gotta stay here and deal with them when they come. It might be a shitty option, but it's the only one we've got."

"It is literally not the only option." Taissa crossed her arms against her chest and leaned sideways a few inches to shoot Van a look. "That's not how options work. Other choices exist, we were just talking about them. You can't just—"

“Fuck,” Nat groaned, sinking to the floor.

“I think we stay,” Lottie called out from the main room.

“Right, well if the messiah herself thinks we stay, I’m assuming you won’t be accepting any alternative suggestions.” Tai raised a challenging brow at Van.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Van threw her arms in the air in frustration, letting them smack back down against her thighs when they landed. “You just listened to my reasoning. I clearly thought this through all by myself myself, thanks.”

“Guys!” Shauna snapped. They both looked at her—one part annoyed at the interruption, one part worried that Shauna had a good reason for it. Tai’s gaze locked onto her shoulder. ‘If you’re gonna argue,’ Shauna said calmly and firmly—her mom voice, “get a room.”

“Coming from you?” Taissa laughed like she wanted it to be funny. “Please, miss can’t stop fighting and fucking her girlfriend in every possible location. I found a suspiciously Jackie-sized pair of panties in the back of the fucking van the other day. You two are impossible.”

“That’s not the same as—” Shauna whined.

“Oh, for the love of—” Van huffed.

“We’re thinking about it wrong,” Jackie said loudly. The other women quieted, turning inquisitive faces toward her. “The whole thing, I mean. We keep defaulting to fighting. And yeah, it’s worked. But just barely. We can’t rely on that now. We’re not gonna fight our way out. Not physically. That wasn’t the plan. We talked about it. We need to convince. We need to manipulate.”

“Exactly!” Misty chimed.

“And the only shot we have of that,” Jackie squeezed Shauna closer, “is staying right here.”

“I think you’re right.” Shauna turned her cheek, resting it against Jackie’s chest. “That’s everyone on the same page except… Tai?”

Tai scrunched her face for just a moment before letting it slacken. “Fine. But we need a real fucking plan.”

“Natalie?” Shauna prompted.

“Yeah, whatever.” Nat grumbled. ‘I’m over trying to—wait.’ Nat shifted to her hands and knees suddenly, crawling forward. “What’s that?”

Van followed her gaze, leaning so far forward she almost folded in half. “What’s what?”

“There.” Nat laid flat on her stomach, reaching one arm blindly beneath the wardrobe. Her legs kicked up behind her. “It’s… something… it’s— ha!”

She scrambled upright, lifting a small notebook—the kind that was more paper folded in half and stapled than anything—above her head in triumph. Van hovered over her shoulder as she thumbed through it.

“Well?” Shauna asked impatiently.

“Holy shit,” Van mumbled, a grin pulling at her freckled cheeks.

“It’s their fucking notes,” Natalie laughed. “It’s full. There’s no way there isn’t useful shit in here.”

“I think,” Misty hurried over excitedly, “we just found the key to our plan.”

“Piss poor hiding spot,” Nat muttered. “But fucking lucky for us they’re such dumbasses.”

“There, uh, might be more,” Shauna blushed so hard her arms went a soft pink. “You should check, like… around that area.”

Oh.

Fuck.

Nat raised an eyebrow. “And why do you say that, Shipman?”

“I might’ve, um… knocked some things off of the desk when we… when Jackie and I came in here to… when we, uh, talked the first night we—”

“Fucking hell,” Nat grimaced.

“Okay, you two are beyond fucking impossible,” Taissa amended. She shimmied forward to search under the bed.

“I told you they were having sex!” Lottie appeared in the doorway, a knowing smirk on her face. ‘Intimacy is important in times of distress,’ she added, clocking the sour face that Jackie knew she must be making. “We all process differently. There’s no shame in—”

“Yeah, yeah.” Nat tapped Shauna’s knee impatiently. “Any other surfaces you cleared off to fuck your girlfriend inappropriately?”

“No.” Shauna pulled the comforter up to her chin. “Just the one.”

“Great,” Van sighed. She rubbed her eyes with her fist wearily. ‘Give it here then.’ Nat handed her the notebook and she opened to the first page. “I’ll read it aloud.”

31. you did so good

December 1996

Jackie knew that she wasn't meant to do this.

Not by rules of nature or God or what passed for society now.

If you asked nature, Jackie ought to be dead. Long dead. Frozen solid and picked apart by starving wolves until only her bones were left, gnawed on and scarred with the frantic gnashing of canines, chewed until there was nothing soft enough to swallow down. Did bones freeze? It was a dumb question, the kind that Jackie knew Shauna would furrow her brow at regardless of the answer, but her bones felt like they might be frozen solid even now, with her blood still pumping and her skin still intact.

But Jackie knew the basics—she shouldn't be alive. There should be no heart bounding in her chest, protesting the exertion and the cold and the boldness that Jackie was tapping into, a part of her that she hadn't dared to access in what felt like forever, but amounted to less than a year.

And as far as God and society went… well, Jackie hadn't followed those developments as closely as she should've. Clearly she'd missed some chapters, as she'd sobbed behind trees and devised ways to goad Shauna into admitting to something, so that she could just forgive her already, and willed herself to die, because the girls were God and the trees were God and the dirt that she knew lay beneath the thick, packed snow that she was currently slipping on was God. And Lottie's word was somehow law and Lottie was somehow in tune with this thing that Jackie hated to admit that she had felt ever since she didn't die, heavy and suffocating, like the air was different out here, and Lottie didn't want Jackie doing this.

Really, really didn't.

But Jackie only cared about one thing.

One person.

One wide-eyed brunette, wrapped in layer upon layer of flannel and clutching the handle of a large water pail with both hands, staring back at Jackie from a distance.

Shauna. Shauna Shauna Shauna Shauna.

Jackie would've run, if she'd had the chance. She would've found the strength to sprint to Shauna, even with no energy and no certainty that Shauna would do anything other than shove her down into the snow where she belonged.

But Jackie didn't get the chance to run.

Shauna started screaming, so loud and desperate that Jackie wondered for a moment if she'd gone into labor because God, she was pregnant. So, so pregnant, and Jackie had been hoping that by some small miracle the universe would bestow the kindness of a miscarriage upon them—her, upon her, because Shauna was just Shauna now, she wasn't

ShaunaAndJackie. Not because Jackie resented the cheating. Not because there was no part of her that wanted to hold Shauna's hand through labor and cut the umbilical cord and wrap that baby—Shauna's baby, Shauna's, something born of Shauna, of her flesh and her bones and her blood and her sweat and her tears, that Jackie could hold to her chest and marvel at—in an airline blanket and kiss it's pretty cheeks.

There was a huge part of Jackie that wanted that, something deep and rooted in her chest that also wanted to say fuck you, Jeff, I'm Shauna's person, I'm this baby's person, I'm more the father than you'd ever be, but the larger part of Jackie, the one that resided in her brain and was steeped in critical thought knew that a miscarriage meant Shauna almost certainly surviving, so miscarriage it was. That had been the prayer she'd made to Gods she wasn't sure she believed in—the God of her parents, the God of Shauna's maternal lineage, the God of the woods. That prayer, like every other, had clearly gone unanswered, because Shauna was so pregnant she could barely walk.

It wasn't labor, though, the screaming.

Jackie's vision narrowed to a pinpoint when Shauna's words were carried to her on the heavy air between them.

"Fuck you!" Shauna shouted at the top of her lungs. "I—I hate you, Jackie! Just leave me the fuck alone!"

Jackie choked on her breath. The cold burned her lungs just as it had the night of the first snow and she thought about lying down again. Soft, it would be soft and it would muffle her hearing and Jackie had always hated leaving things unfinished.

Shauna hurled the pail in Jackie's direction. It sank into the snow just a few feet in front of Shauna, still yards from Jackie. Shauna kicked it and shrieked, primal and wordless.

"Shauna," Jackie sobbed her name, though she knew that Shauna wouldn't hear it over the distance and the impact of her own screams.

"Fuck off, Jackie! I can't do it anymore, just—just please! Please!"

Jackie felt sick rise in her throat— nothingness, bile and air and the emptiness of her stomach, but it burned all the same. Everything burned.

And suddenly, there was Lottie.

Jackie being pushed away faster, craning her neck to look over her shoulder through the heavy tree line, just long enough to catch sight of Taissa and Natalie holding Shauna down as she thrashed on the ground, Misty and Mari running toward them.

It'd taken four of them to calm Shauna enough to get her in the cabin.

Nat and Mari had each taken an arm, Taissa had held her up by the waist, and Misty had supported her back. Lottie and Van had, as fucking usual, fucked off into the woods immediately, running past the chaos that was Shauna Shipman without so much as asking if help was needed.

Shauna was getting too pregnant for this. Nat knew that they were going to have to start taking shifts again. She'd been calm for the past month—mostly silent, unless her imagined version of Jackie was speaking to her.

They'd let it go. They hadn't corrected her or told her that it wasn't real or tried to fucking prevent her from losing her mind, because Shauna laying in the attic, under the impression that she was with Jackie was one hundred times easier to manage than Shauna screaming and crying and attempting fucking suicide. It had gotten so bad before Shauna's hallucinations started that there had been mutterings about whether letting her kill herself was really the worst thing. So Natalie and Taissa had let Shauna spend all of her time alone, babbling to herself quietly, because that was a hell of a lot simpler than starting a goddamn war in the already dangerously tense cabin.

But over the past few days, Shauna's daydreams had turned nightmares, and she was becoming even more difficult to control.

Shauna laid on the floor in front of the fire, her head in Taissa's lap, only her pink, swollen face visible. Nat piled another blanket on top of her, smoothing it down until there were no creases.

"She won't leave me alone," Shauna explained, for the third time since she'd calmed down enough to speak coherently. "I'm—I—I miss her. I miss her so much, but she… she keeps telling me that I killed her. Over and over and over, that's all she says now and I know. I know I did, but it's—"

"You didn't kill her, Shauna," Tai soothed, the words familiar and soft, well-worn with repetition.

"I shouldn't have yelled at her," Shauna whispered. Nat sat in front of her, her legs crossed beneath her, one hand reaching instinctively for Shauna's matted hair. Shauna looked at Natalie with eyes so wide they swallowed everything else in the room. 'What if she never comes back?' Panic was creeping in again, sharp and furious. "God, what if I really made her go? I—I—I can't—I—"

"Hey, hey," Nat comforted, her best imitation of the gentle tone Jackie had always taken when Shauna was upset, "breathe, Shauna."

"I made her go, I—I—what if I—"

Nat met Taissa's eyes, and in one brief moment they came to wordless agreement. Yet another decision to give in to the easier option, to the option that would do the most damage long-term but needed to happen for the now, because they were exhausted and so was Shauna.

"She'll come back," Nat said softly. Tears warmed her own cheeks, cutting through the cold and tingling against her skin. She smoothed her thumb across Shauna's temple. "Okay, Shauna? I know she will. She'll come back."

The hope in Shauna's eyes was more painful than the terror it replaced.

"She will?"

"She will," Taissa whispered. "She will, honey. She wants you to sleep, okay? And then she'll come back."

Jackie was wreck. A shivering, sobbing, shattered wreck, huddled in her sleeping pile in the corner of the bunker, her puffy face flickering in and out of focus in the candlelight.

Lottie was going to have to hurt her even more. She buried her face in her hands, inhaled deep, and shored herself up. This was what the wilderness wanted. This was the best way to keep everyone safe. This wasn't a choice.

Jackie couldn't do that again.

"I didn't tell you this, because I didn't want to hurt you needlessly, Jackie." Lottie forced her tone calm, channeling everything she could think of for strength—the will of the wilderness and the unwavering detachment of her mother and the pure devotion to the cause that Laura Lee had always possessed. "But I'm keeping you here for your protection, you know that. Shauna…" Jackie's cries doubled in volume at the mention of her name. Lottie raised her voice over them. "She has hallucinations of you sometimes."

"She—she does?" Jackie sputtered. "So she's… that means she's… fuck, Lottie, she's not okay! She needs me to—"

"But," Lottie said firmly, "she reacts like that every time she thinks she sees you. When she thinks she's seen you, she's… upset that you aren't dead."

"That doesn't… that doesn't make sense," Jackie sobbed. "She—she hates me, f-fine, but she wouldn't—Shauna w-wouldn't—"

"You saw her reaction with your own eyes." Lottie blinked back tears quickly. Cursed the wilderness for choosing her, ignored Laura Lee watching her in the corner, hated herself more than she ever had. "Shauna doesn't want you there."

December 30th, 2021

"Everybody ready?"

The question was quintessential Van, both in nature and delivery. One brow arched, her tone soft but insistent. She wanted everyone to enjoy themselves, to be at their most comfortable and to focus on the words that she was going to say, but there was a thin edge to it— get comfortable now, or forever hold your peace. The tone that reminded onlookers that she wouldn't be stopping her performance. Not until the intermission, at least, when Taissa would gently pull Van out of her laser-focus, claiming that she needed to pee or get a drink, so that everyone could take five without missing their only entertainment.

There wouldn't be an intermission tonight. There wouldn't be Mari's benevolent heckling —the kind that always added to the fun rather than detracted, even if the other girls enjoyed pretending otherwise. There would be no Akilah to take Mari's hand and quiet her when Van shot her a mock reproachful look, or to put in yet another request for The Truth About Cats and Dogs. No Melissa wrapping her outermost layer around Gen's shoulders when Gen shivered pointedly. No Travis magnifying his expressions after the girls' wilder reactions to the story, to earn a precious laugh from Ja—

Enough.

Shauna needed to be done.

She was physically weakened, which was dangerous enough. She knew the risks associated with being the weakest in the pack. Add to it the way she'd let herself be emotionally overwrought and distracted for weeks on end? They might not be out there, but they were close enough for the other women to shift into even more treacherous waters. Shauna needed to keep it together, which meant not thinking about the past. There was plenty of danger in the present for her to fixate on.

"Comfy?" Jackie's lips brushed Shauna's ear and her fingers sailed through Shauna's hair and God, yeah.

Shauna's muscle was torn through, a mangled mess—her zayde's jagged brisket cuts when she was a little girl, back before he finally accepted that his tremor was too violent to slice through the meat properly. Her head thudded with the dull ache of dehydration that she couldn't stay on top of, no matter how much water Jackie brought to her lips. Her entire right side was a growing web of discomfort, her nerves shooting electric fire through her limbs. And still, Shauna was in far less pain then she'd been in for most of her life.

Because Jackie was laying behind her, her chest pressed to Shauna's back and her legs on either side of Shauna's hips and her fingers interlaced and resting against Shauna's stomach.

"Yeah," Shauna answered. She gripped Jackie's forearm with her good hand. "Are you?"

"Very," Jackie said, her lips nearer to Shauna's temple than her ear, but her breath warm against Shauna's skin all the same.

"I'm good!" Misty sat perched on the desk. Her legs swung almost imperceptibly where they hung off of the edge.

Lottie and Natalie muttered their agreement from their spot on the floor, pressed shoulder to shoulder with their backs against the narrow wardrobe.

"Here." Tai returned from the living room with a pair of silver, wire-framed glasses in hand. "I packed them just in case."

"Thanks." Van patted the cushion she'd made in Tai's absence—one of her sweatshirts, folded up enough times to offer some padding. "Come sit."

With Tai cross-legged beside her and her glasses low on the bridge of her nose, Van was ready.

"Alriiiight," Van cleared her throat and flipped the journal open with a flourish. "Time to deep dive into the psyche of someone even crazier than us, I guess."

Curtains up on the last fucking show Shauna wanted to be watching.

"W has—"

"W…" Tai interrupted, fresh out of the gate. Maybe there would be intermissions. So much of the group dynamic hadn't changed, even with twenty-five years sitting between then

and now, but maybe a dozen joint murders of outsiders (and as many near-misses during fights between the seven of them) was enough to shake some things up. “As in Willow?”

“As in Cara,” Nat said with a snarl, her lip twitching angrily. ‘I know her type. They’re big in fancy residential programs. She’ll fucking hate it when I call her by her real name.’ Angry tears welled in Nat’s eyes. “Murdering cunt.”

Shauna had as good as forgotten that Willow was, by all accounts, the primary suspect in Travis’s murder. She’d been caught red-handed. Arrested for two counts of trespassing in her pursuit of him but let off free and clear, of course, to go on and kill him. To grow bigger and badder and try to take Jackie right out of Shauna’s hands. To orchestrate the kidnapping of Shauna’s fucking daughter, when she couldn’t get close enough to her intended target.

Lottie took Nat’s hand and pulled it toward her. She bowed her head, her dark waves falling in a curtain around her face, and pressed a kiss to each of Nat’s knuckles in quick succession. Nat sunk her teeth into her bottom lip and fought a grimace. Guilt. Shauna could feel it radiating off of her in thick waves, even before she saw the evidence written on her face. Travis had been Nat’s singular focus after his death, her grief pushing her toward risk after risk in her pursuit of answers. But since falling back in with Lottie, Nat had lost that fire, exchanging it for something soft and quiet. And while Shauna couldn’t imagine giving a single fuck about a man, when you had a beautiful woman who you loved in your bed every night—even a woman as dangerous and draining as Charlotte fucking Matthews—she knew that Nat did.

Nat still cared, and it was destroying her.

“The murdering cunt will be dead tomorrow,” Shauna said confidently. Nat swallowed hard. “No matter… no matter what else happens, Natalie. She’s as good as gone.”

Nat gave one quick bob of her chin, a curt nod to show Shauna that they were on the same page.

“Amen to that,” Van muttered.

Jackie nudged her nose against Shauna’s temple, inhaling slowly, exhaling long and loud in Shauna’s ear. Shauna took the unspoken hint, breathing in until her chest ached with the effort of it. Misty had lectured them on the benefits of taking full, deep breaths during recovery, something that Shauna had heard enough about from her mother, repeated during every bout of ailment or injury she’d ever experienced.

Something that Shauna had recited when Jackie’d had pneumonia. Forcing Jackie up when she whined that she couldn’t do it, holding Jackie’s hand while she walked on dragging feet, ignoring the way her own heart felt like it was being constricted each time she had to tell Jackie to do something that hurt. Hating herself for never being able to conjure that level of sympathy for Callie when she was sick, because Jackie had puked down the front of Shauna’s shirt at one point—hot, sticky, sour vomit landing directly on Shauna’s skin—and Shauna had forgotten to even care about it until she had Jackie cleaned up, Jackie back in bed, Jackie turned carefully on her side so that she wouldn’t choke if she vomited again. But even when Callie was a baby, Shauna’s first reaction had been an unstoppable rush of annoyance whenever the milk Callie took came straight back up, coating her breast in frothy sick that she could smell long after she’d scrubbed it off.

“She’s their… God, what the fuck would she even be?” Taissa pinched the pocket of Van’s jeans between her thumb and finger, worrying the denim absently. “Boss? Leader?”

“Oh!” Misty perked up dangerously, her lips curling in the beginning of an excited smile. “I bet you they call it Quee—”

A chorus of disgruntled voices rang out: “Shut up, Misty!”

“I’m just pointing it out.” Misty adjusted her glasses briskly, two fingers pushing on the side of her frames in that particular way of hers, the one that had sparked unfair irritation in Shauna since they were little girls. “They’re clearly into that stuff. What was it you said they called this place, Jackie?”

“The sequester.”

It was ridiculous just how much hearing Jackie’s voice soothed Shauna. Now was not the time to be contemplating the rasp of her q’s, but Shauna had never been an expert at properly timed affection.

“Fucking creeps,” Jackie added. She ran her fingers in absent circles against Shauna’s stomach. “Like, they’re in the world. They have everything they could ever want, and they choose to be even more fucked than—well, just far more fucked up than they have any right to be.”

Shauna had needed the respite of Jackie’s answer, because Misty’s voice—her everything, really—sent Shauna careening into very much warranted anger, now. She’d been part of the scheme to send Jackie straight to her death, the only one involved that Shauna had yet to deal with. It was just… Shauna’s version of dealing with it was rocky at best for the time being, and Misty Quigley was not one to be dealt with carelessly. Even at Shauna’s most primal, she had always retained that knowledge. It was looming over her, though. The way that Misty hadn’t suffered at all for her hand in it, when she was the one who pissed Shauna off the most.

Jackie had apologized. Explained and begged and comforted. Made promises of never ever ever again and I’m yours and I know I did wrong. The words had poured out of her trembling, beautiful lips before Shauna could even experience true anger with her. She wasn’t even sure that she was capable with Jackie, not after everything. There was no wrong that Jackie could do that wouldn’t end with Shauna begging her to stay, and Shauna didn’t have the time or the energy to unpack that. She had to accept it as an undeniable truth and focus on the fact that she got to love Jackie Taylor as a verb, in all the nauseatingly sentimental ways she hadn’t believed were real until Jackie had come home to her. There was no hurt to be had for Jackie at Shauna’s hands ever again, if she could help it.

Shauna had snapped with Lottie. She hadn’t meant to, but she’d seen the crazy train hurtling down the tracks, so she’d thrown herself in front of it and… pointed a Glock at the conductor, she supposed? It hadn’t been intentional, but it’d been something. An outlet. A statement. It was enough. Lottie was so painfully delusional that there was no use. Her actions were those of a madwoman, her confidence in her abilities fierce enough for a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity.

But Misty… she had no excuse. No right. And if circumstances had been different, Shauna might’ve found herself taking drastic measures. But since circumstances were what they were, she felt herself relax against Jackie’s body instead, letting Jackie’s very presence—

down to the fact that Jackie said fuck the same way she had as a teenager, with a wavering u and a sharp k —turn her animosity into background noise.

“Nobody has everything they could ever want,” Lottie said. Natalie locked an arm around her waist at the first chime of her voice, anchoring her to her side. A show of comfort on the surface, but Shauna knew that Nat was ready to restrain her if need be. Shauna should know, because Jackie had held her in some manner during every group conversation. Lottie knew too, it seemed. She patted Nat’s hand dismissively, but didn’t shrug her off. “People will always find more to want for, its in our nature.”

“Yeah, well,” Jackie sighed. “This it isn’t a—a fucking Amex black card they’re after. The more they want is extra fucked.”

Lottie nodded solemnly. “These aren’t your standard seekers. They want something… bigger than themselves. It’s dangerous.”

That’s what Jackie just said, Shauna thought idly.

(How many times had she done that to Jackie herself? How many times had Shauna taken Jackie’s words and cleaned them up and made them pretentious and spit them back at her and how had Jackie not done more than roll her eyes occasionally?)

Shauna traced each tendon in the back of Jackie’s hand.

“The danger is pretty evident, princess,” Nat muttered.

Lottie shrunk down, slouching sideways so that she could rest her head on Nat’s shoulder.

“Sequester is such a specific word.” Misty frowned, tapping her fingers against her knee. “Something about it feels so… off.”

“It isn’t usually used as a noun like that,” Shauna said. “Calling the cabin the sequester is like… well, if you named The Manor something like… the hide.”

“Right, it usually means to withdrawal. You’d say… oh!” Misty grinned directly at Shauna. Shauna tensed—the sudden attention of Misty’s musings was never a place that she liked to find herself. “You would say that nuns sequester themselves in nunneries. Didn’t you want to be a nun for a while, Shauna?”

Shauna felt her cheeks heat up. “For, like, a month or two as a teenager, yeah.”

“God, didn’t we all?” Van muttered in a semi-serious, far-away tone.

Quiet chuckles filled the room.

“Yeah, Shauna,” Tai added with a grin. “I know you love to think you’re just so unique and tortured, but daydreaming about being a nun every once in a while is just a lesbian rite of passage.”

Jackie shifted. Shauna could feel her eyes on her. She blushed harder. They hadn’t talked yet about… well, about any of that. About Shauna’s sexuality… whatever. ‘Crisis’ felt like an insane fucking word to attach to it, considering her moment of realization had come right before such actual, tangible crisis. Leave it to Jackie to pick up on Taissa’s word choice and zero in.

“It isn’t just withdrawal,” Shauna said loudly, pushing past the mess into more familiar territory. “Like… it isn’t just the act of doing something, right? It can also mean exile or banish. Like a thing done upon you.”

“Do you think they’ve used this place as a… punishment or something?” Natalie’s waved at their surroundings. “They seem to have pretty warm feelings about this shit hole. Almost like its a fucking reward to be here.”

“Not necessarily.” Shauna shrugged. “I’m just saying it’s odd phrasing and language clearly means a lot to these freaks.”

“Speaking of language,” Van lifted the journal over her head to draw their attention, “I’ve read exactly two words of this shit. I appreciate the attention to detail, but I think we need to zoom out a little if we’re gonna get through this before dozens of cult murders show up at our door.”

Cult murderers.

That word choice was a fresh wound over an old bruise. Something that had been present, but deep—closer to the bone than the surface—and was now being scratched open slowly, until there was no more barrier between who they were and what they’d done and the outside world. It was as red and angry as Shauna’s shoulder, as Jackie’s scar. They were a group of cult murderers, sitting in a trap made by another group of cult murderers and, honestly, the plot was so convoluted that Shauna would’ve set a novel forged on that premise down after chapter two.

No one mentioned the irony aloud. There were mumbles of sorry and go ahead, and it was back to the races.

This time, Van’s tone delivered more of her old energy: sit down, shut up, don’t interrupt. Shauna felt the women sink into it around her. She closed her eyes, settled herself more comfortably against Jackie, and leaned into the familiarity as she listened.

“W has the plan laid out. There are some pieces that even I am not privy to, but I know far more than most of the others. Everyone has been told the basics. They have to know that what the main event is, or there’s too great a risk of interference from someone who misunderstands the mission when the time comes. God, the speaking in code is such a force of habit. I’ve spent too long hiding all of this, worrying about someone snooping where they shouldn’t be and ruining everything. But now that we’re here, there’s no need. If this book is found in the woods, so be it. There would be such grave problems at that point that a breach of my journal would feel trivial.”

“Astute of her,” Taissa mumbled.

“Speaking of grave,” Misty seized her opportunity to interrupt, “we really need to dig some today. Tripping over the bodies of their friends would be a less than ideal first impression.”

Van clicked her tongue impatiently.

“Right, yeah,” Nat’s tone was dismissive of the interruption, but not the suggestion—terse and gruff and comforting in its certainty. “We’ll do it after this, Misty.”

“Okay,” Van cut back in, ‘let’s see… Everyone knows that we’re taking the— fuck,’ Van paused and took a quick breath, “girl. Callie. A pretty name.”

Shauna tensed. Her body protested with sharp, shooting pains and she forced her muscles to unclench, except her heart which thudded angrily, refusing to obey her order.

“Calliope. The choice makes sense for a woman like Shauna.”

Jackie smoothed Shauna’s hair back and pressed her nose to Shauna’s temple. Shauna turned her head—so that Jackie had better access to her, so that Jackie could see that she was handling this, that she was okay, yes—but also… deep down Shauna knew that she was mostly letting Jackie see that she cared. That she did care about her daughter, that she did have real, genuine feelings and real genuine love within her, that she wasn’t some monster that Jackie had to tiptoe around who didn’t give a fuck about her own child. Shauna cared. She did. It was just complicated and Jackie needed to see that, because the complexity of Shauna’s love for Callie had been borne under layers of Jackie Jackie Jackie Jackie that Shauna had only just begun to sift through.

“The words she wrote might as well have been epic poems, in effect if not structure. Just a teen, and writing page after page to a lover she thought was dead, only to discover her alive decades later?”

“These fucking freaks,” Natalie spat.

Shauna couldn’t bring herself to open her eyes. She could hear the anger she’d find in Natalie’s expression, and she knew that seeing Nat genuinely furious about this would be the end of her resolve.

“It might be horrible of me—I know Willow was set on it, convinced it would be better, but a little part of me is glad,” Van stumbled slightly, telling Shauna exactly what was coming before the words even left her mouth, “that we couldn’t get to Jackie. I’m a sucker for the tragic romance of it all.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Taissa said, her disgust evident. “The freaky fucking flowers are starting to make sense. These people are acting like… I don’t know, obsessed fans.”

Shauna’s eyes shot open. She had to look at Taissa, just to make sure. Shauna had to take in her hair and her face and her body and assess her for damage and reassure herself that there was none. That Taissa was there and okay, because other images threatened to overtake Shauna’s vision. Waves rolling in, crashing up to Tai’s neck. Water choking her. Jackie dropping beneath blue so dark it was black and not coming up when Shauna grabbed her shoulders.

They’re obsessed with us.

Taissa in her sick bed, muttering incoherent words that she didn’t remember saying. Jackie coughing so hard Shauna could see the skin suck in around the bones of her ribs and her clavicle when she tried to catch her breath.

Shauna gripped Jackie’s thigh with her good hand and pushed herself upright.

“Hey, hey,” Jackie said quickly, supporting Shauna from behind with hands planted firmly on either side of her waist. “Slow down, baby. It’s okay. Are you uncomfortable? Do you

wanna move?"

Taissa and Nat looked at Shauna with such concern it made her feel sick. Lottie, Van, and Misty avoided her eyes—Lottie's sealed tight, Misty inspecting her nails awkwardly, Van skimming ahead in the journal. Shauna was transported back to the real cabin, all those years ago—still the girl who couldn't figure out what was real and what wasn't, the girl who choked on her breath and got so frustrated by the confusion she had to hit something just to know that she was alive.

Another vision hit Shauna—Jackie failing to free Taissa, Shauna never managing to pull Jackie out of the waves. Everything since then an illusion, some sick comfort that Shauna had built for herself, while their bodies decomposed in the Atlantic, bloated with salt water and rotting.

"Shauna?" Taissa pushed herself forward, halfway to standing.

Shauna shook her head. "I'm okay. I'm fine, just… can we do the abridged version, Van?"

Taissa's eyes narrowed with concern but she relented, resettling on her makeshift cushion. Jackie wriggled out from behind Shauna.

"Just… y'know, the details that could help us. This is just making me feel…" Shauna swallowed, pushing down at the nausea building in her stomach.

"Yeah, of course." Van had already started skimming ahead, whether because she couldn't stop herself from reading on or because she'd expected the request, Shauna couldn't tell. "Just give me a sec."

Jackie fluffed pillows and fussed with Shauna's positioning, adjusting blankets and limbs until Shauna was half-reclining in the bed.

"Are you okay?" Jackie laid beside Shauna, propped up on one elbow and facing her.

"Fine," Shauna answered abruptly, ignoring the sharp dissents her body made to that answer—lightheadedness and renewed pain and sick rising in her esophagus. "Just… being that angry isn't really conducive to healing." Shauna did her best to deliver it as half a joke.

"No, it isn't." Jackie rested her hand against Shauna's chest, running her thumb in small circles. "I'll be angry for the both of us."

Shauna smiled weakly and tipped her chin up. Jackie pecked her on the lips swiftly.

"Alright," Van said, her words muffled slightly by a pen held between her lips. Taissa plucked it out and set it in Van's lap. "Okay, so… skipping the fucking insane ruminations: Dates themselves don't usually hold significance, of course. Human invention, and all, unlike the phases of the moon. But the new year is different. We've put so much power into it as a people that it has come to hold real meaning."

"Oh, good God." Tai rolled her eyes.

"That's such bullshit," Lottie said, evidently genuinely annoyed by the inaccuracy of it.

Van hit each of them with a stern look in turn. "James, Andrew, and I will set up at first light on the 31st, to avoid any disturbances to our work that may take place if left overnight.

Some of the traps are already laid. Everything is timed to perfection. Sunset is at 5:17 pm. Everyone will arrive at 3:00 pm, which gives us two hours for the hunt. At nightfall, we…" Van cleared her throat roughly, "cook."

"Cook," Shauna repeated blankly.

She hadn't considered it. Shauna truly hadn't thought for one moment that anyone who didn't absolutely have to, no matter how psychotic and depraved, would… would eat… fuck.

"Jesus Christ," Jackie choked out.

There were mumblings of holy fuck and oh my God, but Shauna couldn't track who they came from because the word cook was slamming into the sides of her skull and ricocheting freely. And Callie. Where was Callie?

Shauna stared at Jackie, confusion and uncertainty flooding her. Dizzy—she was dizzier than was manageable, really, and she couldn't remember where Callie was supposed to be right now and she hated how familiar that feeling was. Late to picking her up, from daycare or basketball or a sleepover, because Shauna had simply forgotten about her.

"Callie is safe," Jackie soothed. She slid her palm against Shauna's cheek and used her grip to force eye contact. "She's not here, Shauna. She's with Jeff and Sadie and Midori and she's safe."

"Even if we can't be sure that she's at the trail head, she certainly isn't here," Misty interjected. Shauna snapped her head to glare at her and the motion made stars burst in front of her, dancing white and black and gray. "And we're right where all the ritual stuff is supposed to happen, so we know for sure she's not at risk!"

Jackie guided Shauna's gaze back to her. "Callie's safe. I promise."

Shauna nodded slowly. She tasted something bitter— metallic on her tongue, but not in a way that made her feel peaceful, like drawing Jackie's split lip between her own and sucking. It was ominous. Terrifying.

"Should I keep—" Van started cautiously.

"Yeah," Shauna interrupted. 'Keep going. I'm fine.' Van hesitated a beat longer. "Really, I am."

"This is what the others aren't all privy to: the fact that you must consume the sacrifice to form a true connection. I fear we'll have to kill a few. Willow let many join that I was unsure of. She's open to seeing the potential in others in a way that I can only hope to emulate one day. Mmmm… a bunch of musings about little miss Bonnie Nettles wannabe—"

"Bonnie Nettles?" Nat asked.

"The Heaven's Gate lady," Tai said.

"The beep boop bop cult, or whatever the fuck?" Natalie's scoffed with disdain.

"Ti and Do," Misty corrected, because of course she did.

"Black tracksuits, matching Nikes, existed at that weird intersection of Christian fundamentalist and UFO enthusiast?" Van offered.

Shauna let the banter wash over her. It was better somehow, like listening to them chatter away in the locker room. The worry was easing out of Jackie, her brows relaxing and her jaw unclenching. Shauna smiled for her to drive it home.

“They’re the first group that I really studied. I got involved in citizen detectives that way. Well, them and Princess Di’s mysterious death, which we all know was really a regicide,” Misty said, matter-of-fact. “It started with studying the big things we’d missed. You know, because we were still out there when they—”

“When they ate their applesauce of death,” Tai said. “Yeah, I remember.”

“Maybe these fuckers will go for that,” Nat sighed.

“Something about their pretentious bullshit tells me they’d find it tacky if we started dolling out cartons of Tree Top.” Jackie pursed her lips in annoyance at her once-kidnappers. “I bet they’d go for some nasty herbal tea.”

“Euthanasia by echinacea?” Shauna suggested.

Jackie’s giggle in response made Shauna’s world right again, if only for a moment.

“God, this is heavy on the freaky homoerotic crush, I’ll tell you that much.” Van scrunched her nose, flipping the page briskly. “Okay, if any acolytes refuse their blessing, they will have to be culled.”

“Culled,” Tai made a retching noise. “God, who the fuck do they think they are with that shit?”

“They’ll be told they can fall into a second group, to receive alternate sacrament in the form of a special tea. Fuck, well there’s your tea, Jack. Willow will tell them that there are a few drops of blood in the drink, just as Lottie used to do for the Yellowjackets themselves to keep them safe. It’s fascinating actually, the way she would prepare it before the hunt—”

“Did you have to write down everything, Shauna?” Nat asked idly.

“You’re right,” Shauna said. “I should’ve suspected that a yuppie cult of new-age freaks would one day become obsessed with emulating the actions of starving, psychotic teenage girls and take the initiative to steal my journals. My bad.”

“Touché.” Natalie titled her head to the side in reluctant assent. Her fingers flexed as they tightened around Lottie’s waist.

“You knew a lot of fucking bad could come of them.” Taissa grimaced. “You told us you destroyed them.”

“They had… everything.” Shauna said softly.

“Yeah, we know. That’s the whole—”

“No. I mean, yeah that stuff. But… everything about…” Shauna looked at Jackie pointedly, “every single thing I could remember about Jackie. I couldn’t… I just couldn’t. I’m sorry, okay? I’m a selfish bitch, what’s new?”

“Oh, Shauna,” Taissa crept forward, bracing her weight in her knees so that she could place a hand on Shauna’s ankle.

Jackie kissed Shauna's forehead and readjusted, laying close enough that her body was pressed against Shauna's side.

"Alright, blah, blah, blah, very gay and reverent tangents describing both Lottie and Shauna, etcetera etcetera," Van said. "Here we go: if we tell them that there is a negligible amount of blood, Willow is confident they will all drink. We offer it at the same time as the meal, and those who drank will all die together. Anyone who refuses the drink will be shot, if need be."

"So they were literally planning a murder-suicide already?" Tai said. "That's… kind of great for us."

"Seems like all murder, no suicide," Natalie corrected. "But yeah, sure sounds like it.

"At that point," Van read, 'we will have the wilderness's protection, so the cleanup will be no great hassle. That's pretty much it.' She pulled her glasses off and hung them from the front of her sweater. "We should read the rest just in case but from what I can tell, this is everything about tomorrow."

"So that's it," Jackie said. Shauna followed Jackie's voice, but when she tried to focus on her face it was blurry around the edges, the wisps of loose hair framing her cheeks a haze of dark. "We offer our blood, tell them some bullshit about how they misheard the wilderness's call and we were sent to steer them on the proper path. How… fuck, I don't know, our blood is fortified? There's no… new death necessary. If we offer them our blood, they'll eat that shit up."

"Literally," Natalie grumbled.

"It feels too easy," Misty said.

"Well, convincing them is the hard bit, right?" Van's voice sounded far away, like it used to when it was filtered through trees and wind and something heavy hanging in the dead air. "After that the mechanics are smooth sailing."

"I think we can do it."

Shauna couldn't even tell who was speaking anymore. She was fading too fucking fast, barely even capable of being pissed at herself for it.

"Shauna? Shauna, are you okay?"

That was Jackie, Shauna could tell that much. She could almost always separate Jackie's voice from the rumble, even when she couldn't respond.

"Fuck, she's really pale! Misty!"

There was movement and panic. Time seemed to speed up and slow down according to its own whims. Shauna was shifted sideways, her shoulder was prodded at, a blood pressure cuff tightened around her arm, something cold and metal slid down her shirt, Jackie's hands roamed across her body nervously.

"There's… there's nothing wrong enough for this! She should be fine, I don't get it."

“Jesus, fuck, Misty, what do you mean?” Nat snapped. “She looks as gray as she did with the—the fucking labor. Something’s definitely fucking wrong.”

“I know that, but I can’t figure out what—”

“It isn’t just the physical,” Lottie said, the sentence tumbling out frantic and rushed. No. No, no, no. Shauna tried to sit up, but she didn’t make it more than a few inches before Jackie was bracing her, leading her back down against the pillows. “I… I think it wants something for her healing. We cheated.”

“Give me your knife, Van,” Jackie said calmly.

“No!” Shauna forced out. There were footsteps, mutterings of halfhearted protest from Nat and Taissa, a click of something metal. Shauna tried to swat at Jackie blindly, to knock the knife out of her hand. “Jackie, stop!”

It was too late. Shauna’s eyes finally allowed her clear vision, just long enough to watch as Jackie carved a shallow line directly above her scar. Blood dripped down her chest, catching on her baby pink sweatshirt and staining it red.

“Shauna, it’s barely anything, okay?” Jackie took Shauna’s hand and squeezed. “It just… can’t hurt to try. It’s okay. I’m okay.”

Shauna was so much better.

She’d been sleeping, so Jackie couldn’t tell how she was doing mentally, but physically she was like a new woman. Turning herself in bed without wincing or waking from pain. Gloriously pink in the cheeks—all traces of pallor had vanished just minutes after Jackie had made the… sacrifice, or whatever.

Jackie had left her side just long enough to pee, unable to hold it any longer and satisfied enough by three hours of hard evidence—a very healthy looking Shauna, sleeping soundly—to make a break for it. She scurried past Nat and Lottie, who were rolling Morgan into a shallow grave, as she made her way back to the cabin.

Nat stood up straight, wiping her hands on her jeans. “How is it?” she asked, jerking her head toward Jackie’s chest.

Jackie turned, walking backwards slowly, unwilling to fully break her momentum toward Shauna.

“Fine,” she insisted. It was fine. It was a glorified paper cut. She’d simply felt for the seam at the top of her scar and drawn a line along it—no skin had peeled back, barely any blood had fallen, it didn’t even really hurt. “I don’t even think it needed a bandage, honest. Misty just likes a reason to fuss.”

“Don’t I know it.” Nat smiled, a fonder glint in her eyes than Jackie had ever expected she’d have at the mention of Misty. “Just take care of it. No more infections until we’re back in robbing distance of a fucking pharmacy.”

“I will,” Jackie promised. She chewed on her lip and hesitated. “I’m, uh, sorry that I’m not helping with…” Jackie gestured weakly at the shovels and dirt and corpses.

“You are helping,” Lottie answered before Natalie could. “We need Shauna, and Shauna needs you.”

Nat shrugged and kicked some dirt into place. “You heard the lady. It’s fine, Jackie. Don’t worry about it.”

“The afternoon activity options were grave-digging, journal close reading, and hemlock collecting,” Lottie added, stretching her arms above her head and rolling her neck side to side. “We picked our poison.”

“And babysitting Shauna,” Nat winked, “and nobody but you wants that job.”

“More for me,” Jackie grinned.

She took the porch steps at a jog, uneasy about the mere five minutes she’d spent away from Shauna, even though she knew that Taissa had situated herself with a clear view of Shauna from her spot in the main room. Jackie muttered hello to Tai as she passed her. Pages ripped from Morgan’s journal sat around Tai in a circle, along with the notes that Misty had taken on everything else. It reminded Jackie of seventeen. Of the way Shauna had prepped for AP exams on her bedroom floor, while Jackie laid in her bed and pretended to focus on her French flashcards. Of the way Tai must’ve done the same, with Van stretched out beside her.

Every step Jackie took ramped her anxiety up higher, higher, higher, until she was holding her breath in the threshold of the bedroom, half expecting to find Shauna cold and lifeless.

Shauna stirred the moment Jackie skidded into the room.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Shauna used both hands to push herself up in bed, a tiny triumphant smile crossing her features as she glanced at her right arm in awe. It faded the moment she laid eyes on Jackie. She locked her gaze on Jackie’s chest, so clearly ready to launch into I told you so’s if she saw even a trace of fresh blood. Jackie touched the bandage automatically—no moisture, just dry, compact gauze pulled taut across the narrow stretch of skin. The sting of it was almost as reassuring as Shauna’s newly uninhibited movement. It was tangible change, something that Jackie was doing to make Shauna better. Fuck sense making, fuck logic, fuck everything besides the woman in front of her, looking miles further down the road to mended than she had just hours ago.

Jackie cleared her throat. Shauna didn’t break her focus.

“My eyes are up here, y’know,” Jackie quipped cautiously.

Shauna’s attention snapped to Jackie’s face instantly, as though she’d truly been caught gawking. As if Jackie would feel anything other than delight at that. As if Jackie wouldn’t kill to transform their surroundings—forest to beach, cabin to cabana, cotton shirt to bikini top. Shauna should be dumbstruck by cleavage, not a wound.

“Fuck off.” Shauna rolled her eyes, and the tiny shake of her head that came with it was so Shauna it stole Jackie’s breath. Another glimpse of Jackie’s Shauna—the girl Jackie knew

was still in there, but had hardly gotten the chance to see through the chaos. “You’re impossible.”

“Me? Impossible?” Jackie exaggerated the swing of her hips as she crossed the room. Shauna almost let a smile slip. Jackie put on a melodramatic pout. “You must have me confused with one of your other girlfriends.”

“Oh, that’s so bad.” Shauna scrunched her nose, a grin finally warming her features. “You couldn’t come up with anything better than that?”

She was putty-soft, ready for Jackie to take her in her hands and press her into comfort. Gone were the last dregs of stoicism, and with them the air of disapproval that Jackie had known was simply fear speaking louder than fairness.

“Mmm, not on short notice.” Jackie reclaimed her perch on the side of the bed. “Hi, baby.”

Shauna squeezed Jackie’s thigh. “Hi.”

“How’re you feeling?”

“Gross,” Shauna muttered. She kicked the blankets off of her legs and sniffed. “It’s so fucking hot in here. I was sweating buckets in my sleep.”

“Let me get a washcloth.” Jackie stood, the relief of another opportunity to be useful washing over her. “Cool you off some.”

Jackie felt Shauna’s eyes follow her as she gathered a stack of gray towels— also recognizably from Ikea and God, there was something so fucking bleak about being in a nightmare, house of horrors, recreation of your own personal hell and having it be the uncanny valley Ikea showroom edition. Jackie wet the cloths with Shauna’s blue Nalgene and rung them out, letting the water drip straight onto the unfinished wood floors.

“Misty found one of those fans.” Jackie resumed her post, armed with her tools, and brushed Shauna’s hair off of her forehead. “You know, the kind for wood stoves that runs on heat? The kind your—”

“The kind bubbe had, yeah.” Shauna offered a weak smile. Jackie swiped the cloth over her brow. “Those things fucking work.”

“We could get one.” Jackie smoothed over each of Shauna’s full cheeks. “For our house, I mean. Callie would get a kick out of making fun of it, but I think they’re kind of nice.”

Shauna inhaled slowly. She held it for a beat before releasing. Jackie moved down her neck, forging a path toward her chest.

“I know you must think I’m… fucking horrible,” Shauna said. Jackie frowned, opening her mouth to interject, but Shauna was determined to get the words out. “The—the worst mother in the world and… I mean, I kind of am, but—”

“I do not.” Jackie shook her head violently. “And we both know I’m a bad mother expert. I studied at the institute of Marilyn Taylor’s only child for eighteen years.”

Shauna chuckled softly, but it wasn’t enough to derail her.

“I just… I need you to understand.” Shauna’s hand found Jackie’s thigh again. Jackie took the opportunity to sweep the washcloth over Shauna’s forearm, counting the sunspots that adorned her skin while she waited for Shauna to get the words out. “It doesn’t make it okay, but… I just—Callie has never been all the way real to me.”

Jackie blinked. Set the rag aside. Interlaced their fingers. Watched Shauna’s throat bob with effort.

“After you… after I let the baby… after the baby died, I just… I never accepted Callie as real. Not fully.”

Jackie had gotten used to this feeling—this punishing, sinking sensation that made her feel as though her organs weren’t fixed in place, like true hysteria, but instead of a wandering uterus, Jackie had a wandering stomach, a wandering heart, wandering lungs— but this time it caught her off-guard. She swayed a little with the force of it.

Shauna squeezed her hand, her eyes gone glossy with determination. “And it took me a while to understand that you’re real. This you. Right now. But I think… I think because you were real to me once, it was easier to believe that you are now. You were the only thing that mattered, so I just… you get to be real again and Callie never… I never quite got there with her.”

And God, Jackie understood.

Not in the exact way that Shauna meant it, of course. Jackie hadn’t struggled with the literal realities of life since they’d come back to the world. But permanence? Jackie had never found herself acknowledging it, even when opportunities had arisen. Shauna had been Jackie’s only certainty in life and once she’d been ripped away from Jackie, nothing and no one could begin to touch that emptiness.

Even in concrete, less emotional ways—Jackie had spent most of her life as someone else. She couldn’t be Jackie. Jackie wasn’t real. She could never count on a city or a woman or a name being part of her forever.

So Jackie understood. She could translate that—take her own broken pieces and lay them out and see how much worse it was for Shauna.

“You did so good,” Jackie whispered.

She smoothed her thumb across Shauna’s cheek in small circles. Shauna’s eyes widened in shock. Her nails dug into Jackie’s leg.

“You tried so hard. You did the best you could,” Jackie repeated.

She pitched forward and pulled Shauna into her arms, hugging her as close as she could. Shauna clutched at Jackie, her arms locked around Jackie’s neck and her face planted in the crook of it.

“It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t.” Jackie sniffed back the tears. “But it’s gonna get easier now. I’m here. We’re gonna fix it. And you did so good, baby. I’m so proud of you.”

Jackie could feel something in the shake of Shauna’s shoulders. Something different than all the other times she’d held her like this—the burgeoning release of all the palpable hate that

Shauna had for herself. Jackie rocked Shauna side to side, muttering gentle praise over and over, until she felt satisfied that it was truly beginning to sink in.

32. the stillness of the woods

"Shauna?" Tai called. "Jackie? Can I come in?"

"Yeah," Shauna croaked.

Her throat was raw, but the rest of her felt better. There was a distinct absence of the stabbing pain that had been debilitating her nonstop, even when Misty had plied her with narcotics. Her head wasn't throbbing angrily the way it usually did after crying, either. Something had lifted. Something had softened.

Maybe foolishly, considering the fact that they still had fucking insanity to wade through—murderous cult members and murdering cult members and covering their crimes and Shauna was certain that the list would go on to encompass more than she could even imagine dealing with right now.

But Shauna had Jackie's feet in her lap and a sense of calm, of permanence, of reality attached to their relationship for the first fucking time. Maybe it was being in the woods—some sort of returning to their roots bullshit. That's what Lottie would say. Maybe it was the knowledge that Jackie had discovered all of Shauna's secrets—all of her shame and her failings and her wickedness—and Jackie had responded to them by telling Shauna that she did a good job.

And it didn't matter if it was true or not, if Shauna believed it or not, because all that mattered was that Jackie did. Shauna knew that Jackie was being honest. That she had thoroughly examined every horrible thing that Shauna had ever done and decided to forgive her, to appreciate her for trying, to love her anyway.

Shauna had suddenly, beautifully, been able to believe what Jackie had been telling her since they'd spent their first nights together, barely sleeping for fear of missing a single moment of each other's presence, curled up on a shitty mattress in a shitty motel off of I-90.

And God, it felt good.

Tai pushed the door open hesitantly, peering around the corner.

"We wouldn't say come in if you couldn't," Shauna laughed lightly through her nose.

Jackie crossed her legs automatically, one ankle covering the other and her thighs pressing together, even though she wore heavy jeans and long wool socks and they'd truly not been up to anything, besides talking aimlessly.

"Yeah, well," Tai stepped into the room, Morgan's diary held loosely in her hand and a small smile pulling at her lips, "sometimes I think we have different standards for these things."

Tai crossed the room to the desk, letting her weight fall in her hands and jumping a little so that she could sit, exactly where Shauna had lifted Jackie when they'd—

“What’s up, Tai?” Jackie asked, breaking Shauna out of her hazy memories before she had a chance to sink into them too deeply.

Shauna shook her head slightly, admitting to herself what she never would out loud—that maybe Taissa had a point about her lack of… proper decorum when Jackie was around.

“Its, uh… an update, I guess.” Tai held the diary out, her thumb acting as a placeholder, the small book open to a page covered in tiny scrawl that bled into the margins and filled every inch of space. “An entry from after Morgan got… after they, um, realized that Jackie was going to be…” Tai eyed Jackie wearily, “y’know, coming out here.”

The slight bounce in Jackie’s feet stilled. Shauna felt Jackie’s eyes on her, but she kept her own fixed ahead as she ran a hand blindly up and down Jackie’s shin to soothe her.

“But, um, basically,” Tai continued, “it’s really solid evidence that Callie is okay. They had no intentions of keeping her after… after they got Jackie.”

“Good,” Shauna nodded. Jackie’s hand slipped into hers and Shauna tangled their fingers automatically. “That’s good. Did you find anything else?”

“Just what looks like a fucking chore list tucked in the back. Nat thinks we should do the things on it, so nobody suspects anything out of the ordinary right away.” Tai set the journal aside when it became clear that Shauna had no interest in reading the words firsthand. “Clearing brush around the perimeter, stacking logs, that sort of shit. She’s starting on it now.”

“I can help her.” Jackie’s legs were out of Shauna’s lap before Shauna had a chance to cling to her. She swung herself to sit on the edge of the bed and reached down for her boots.

Shauna whined under her breath, unable to stop the little noise of dissent altogether, settling for making it quiet enough that Jackie and Taissa might not be able to hear it. There was so much irony in the consuming fear that Shauna felt with Jackie volunteering to step out of her sight. Jackie going to help with the dirty work without even being asked to had been Shauna’s daily prayer decades ago, but every time Jackie did it now, Shauna wanted to fucking scream.

“I’m sure it won’t take long, baby,” Jackie said, hunched forward, pulling her laces tight. She sat up and smiled, giving Shauna’s thigh a quick squeeze. ‘You probably need some rest, anyway. Both of you do,’ Jackie all but glared in Taissa’s direction, “I heard you coughing last night. You’re still sick.”

“Barely,” Tai muttered weakly, a halfhearted protest.

Jackie paused before walking away, leaning into Shauna’s space and pressing their lips together quickly. Jackie peppered Shauna’s cheek with kisses, moving along a diagonal, until she reached Shauna’s ear.

“If that’s okay with you?” Jackie whispered, low enough that Shauna had to strain to make out the words. “I haven’t forgotten that I promised I’d ask first.”

Shauna swallowed hard. Something thick and sweet rolled through her—molasses pressing between her lips, sliding down her throat, passing through her chest, settling low in her belly.

She pulled Jackie into a hug to mask the exchange, turning until she could speak into her hair, “You can go, baby.”

“Thanks, love,” Jackie said loud enough for Tai to hear, dropping a final kiss to Shauna’s forehead before backing toward the door. “Tai, you better lay the fuck down.”

“Fuck off with the orders, Taylor.” Tai rolled her eyes but moved to fill the space that Jackie had vacated all the same. “I am going to though, because you two have been hogging the bed and my back is fucking killing me.”

“That’ll have to be good enough.” Nat brushed her palms off on her black jeans. Wood creaked beneath her as she plopped down on the porch step.

The sun was starting to set—early, now that winter had truly come on. Jackie hated it. She’d tried her whole life to find reasons to love it—little Sadie bundled up in a snowsuit, warm drinks around the fire with Lottie and Van, tucked in movie nights with whatever woman she was seeing. But Jackie needed the sun. She cherished it. She’d been afraid of the dark for as long as she could remember, since her world was ghost stories and s’mores and clinging to Shauna’s arm during backyard camp-outs in other girls’ yards. And the goddamn bunker had made it unimaginably worse.

“I think we did great.” Jackie fished through her jacket pocket as she sank down beside Nat. “Smoke?”

Jackie held the pack and a light out to Nat. Nat laughed as she took one, gruff and deep and so warm it made the looming darkness a little less unsettling.

“You brought cigarettes with you when you walked into your fucking death trap?”

“I didn’t think I’d die,” Jackie clarified, because she felt like she ought to. She lit her own cigarette and inhaled, stashing the rest back in her pocket. “And no. I didn’t bring them. I took them off of one of the bodies before you buried them.”

Nat laughed on an inhale, coughing smoke into the air. It danced around her face and Jackie noticed the absence of breath mingling with it. The snow had been a false start. It was unseasonably warm—chilly, but only just.

(Global warming, Taissa had insisted when Lottie had started to suggest her gratitude for the lack of snow sticking to the dirt.)

“That’s sick, Jackie,” Nat said, though the smile on her face told Jackie that she was more entertained by the depravity than anything.

“He was an asshole,” Jackie shrugged, kicking her feet out in front of her and leaning back with her weight in her free hand. “Besides, it’s not like he was gonna use them.”

“Surprised a group like this even allows smoking.” Nat laid back, an arm beneath her head and her face turned skyward. “Would’ve thought they’d be strict with all that shit.”

“Mmm,” Jackie hummed her easy agreement, though she truly hadn’t given their proclivities much thought at all, if she was being honest with herself. She’d been too busy

watching her people, staying tuned into their wants and needs and hurts. “You haven’t been drinking,” she blurted out, her words unrestrained and ill-advised, but impossible to swallow down.

The shift had been noticeable. Nat had gone from liquor in her water bottle, to wine with dinner, to ordering a Shirley Temple at the bar, and Jackie had been waiting for a chance to ask about it.

“You’ve always just said shit, you know that?” Nat pushed herself upright to give Jackie a look that was half amusement and half surprise. “When you like people, at least. Strangers get the careful fucking considerate you. But once you really like somebody, it’s fucking anything goes.”

“Yeah,” Jackie twisted her wrist to pop it, as she ashed her cigarette carefully onto a patch of dirt, “bites me in the ass sometimes.”

“Shouldn’t,” Nat said, her voice thin on an exhale. “It usually isn’t bad. People just don’t like being confronted with their shit.”

They smoked in silence, watching as the sun dropped lower on the horizon, orange light filtering through grand oaks and casting twisted shadows on the ground.

“I haven’t been drinking,” Nat said eventually, ‘because I had you dumbasses to take care of. And since Lottie and Shauna can’t stop killing people,’ Nat shrugged, “guess it requires a sober mind, or something like that.”

Jackie let another beat of silence pass. She shook her heel, letting her boot thud against the wood step a few times.

“You good?” Nat prodded the side of Jackie’s thigh gently with her knuckles.

“I can’t stop loving them,” Jackie admitted quietly. A small smile twisted her lips, though her throat felt full and her stomach heavy. “Even when I shouldn’t. I just… keep loving them.”

“Lottie, right?” Nat asked. Her tone gave nothing away. She was calm and quiet, watching Jackie carefully. Open, earnest, caring Nat and God, Jackie had really fucking missed her. “The one you shouldn’t.”

“I mean, probably not just her.”

The bunker had been pressing in on Jackie. It had always lived in the back of her mind, crawling through the periphery, silent and looming. But going down in that goddamn cellar in Ricardo’s had cemented the memories as a fucking guest star in most of Jackie’s thoughts. And, yeah, she’d been mad. She’d wanted Lottie dead, for a brief moment, when she’d finally learned just how bad Shauna had gotten in her absence. But Jackie hadn’t gotten mad for herself, yet. For the girl who had sobbed in a dark, damp hole in the ground because she was convinced that everyone she’d ever loved fucking hated her.

Jackie was haunted for both of them now.

“But… she really fucked me up,” Jackie whispered, as though the dullness of her voice could soften the truth. “Me and Shauna.”

“I know.” Nat shifted her foot closer to Jackie’s—heel-toe, heel-toe, until their legs were touching.

“She’s always been sick. She didn’t mean to do it. But I got good at it, y’know?” Jackie sniffed loudly, tamping down on the emotion and leaning into the logic of it. The truly confounding part of it all. “I found all sorts of reasons to never speak to women again. To just cut and run. Things that were… fucking nothing compared to this. But not them. No matter what, I just keep loving them. At this point it’s like… I don’t think there’s anything they could possibly do to make me stop loving them.”

“Fuck,” Nat rubbed the back of her neck, her head shaking almost imperceptibly in a way that was so deeply Nat—eighteen-year-old, feisty, sweet, good, kind, hurting Nat, that it made Jackie feel twenty-five years younger in an instant. “I know exactly what you mean.”

“I really missed you,” Jackie said softly. ‘I missed everyone and… and obviously I missed Shauna like… a fucking lung, or something cheesy and pathetic like that,’ Jackie laughed to offset the embarrassment. Nat chuckled with her. “But other than her, I really… really missed you.”

Nat nodded, her eyes glassy, her mouth set in a careful line.

“I mourned you,” she said simply.

She dropped the nub of her cigarette, smoked down to the filter line, by her foot and stomped it out.

“Like…” Nat swallowed thickly, ‘fucking grieved. It shocked me how much. I helped Shauna make a gravestone. Not a gravestone, really. Just,’ she waved her hands in front of her —wide, circling motions with her palms facing the ground, “fucking stones. Jewish thing, I guess.”

Jackie took Nat’s hand between both of her own, pulling it into her lap.

“I thought you were lucky. For not having to—to live with it all. But you were fucking…” Nat squeezed Jackie’s hand and shook her head violently. “I should’ve checked. Should’ve known better than to trust them with it.”

“You couldn’t have known,” Jackie said.

“I know.” Nat pulled her hand away to run it through her hair roughly. “They really had you convinced it was the only option, yeah?”

Jackie nodded, afraid to open her mouth and let words fall out, afraid of what she might say. They, they, they. Lottie and Van, though she liked to pretend that wasn’t the case. Liked to ignore that Van and cling to the Van that she’d known ever since they’d left that place.

“You didn’t just leave Shauna,” Nat said. ‘I didn’t know what to do without someone else who was… who thought this shit was crazy.’ She looked down at her hands, clasped tightly between her knees. “Fucking sucked.”

“I love you,” Jackie wiped the tears off of her own cheeks and leaned in quickly to plant a kiss on one of Nat’s.

Nat squirmed away a little, her laugh filling the air around them. “Are you trying to kiss me, Taylor?”

“No,” Jackie giggled, settling her hands behind her hips and letting her weight sink into them. “Shauna would probably do something fucking insane if I did. Lottie too, actually.”

Nat snorted. “Lottie would probably just kiss you too, to make it even.”

“Remember when we did though?” Jackie grinned, bumping Nat’s shoulder with her own hard enough that Nat swayed sideways.

Natalie raised her eyebrows and Jackie shrugged innocently.

“I do,” Nat answered with a wide smile. “Shocked the shit out of me.”

Jackie threw her head back and laughed. It felt good—sitting on the porch smoking, talking about the real shit, giggling about the time they played seven minutes in heaven and Jackie had practically jumped Natalie, after Natalie had insisted that they didn’t have to do anything.

“Were you and Shauna already a thing then?” Nat asked.

“Yeah. It was… messy, but we were hooking up, yeah. Were you and Lot?”

Nat sighed, a little wistful, a little broken, “Yeah.”

“She missed you. I’m not telling you that to try and… influence anything,” Jackie clarified quickly, noting the flicker of suspicion that crossed Nat’s features. “I would get it if you cut and run. But… she doesn’t always say things clearly, so I think you should know. She missed you every day.”

“Like a lung, or whatever?” Nat mimicked Jackie playfully.

“Like a lung, or whatever, yeah.” Jackie smacked Nat’s leg, her eyes falling into a gentle roll. “You get what I mean.”

“Yeah.” Nat pulled Jackie into a side hug, her arm wrapping around Jackie’s shoulders and holding tight. “Love you, too, Jackie.”

“What were you two whispering about?” Tai yawned, stretching her arms over her head.

She’d slept hard—deep breaths and frozen limbs and drool pooling on Jackie’s pillow—but Shauna had laid awake listening. Listening to Taissa, of course. Tuning into her inhales and exhales and keeping time with them, the same in these woods as she had done in those woods.

But listening for Jackie, too. Listening carefully, because Shauna knew that Jackie would yell for her if something went wrong and Shauna was finally, finally recovered enough to actually protect her.

Listening as Van and Lottie and Misty discussed the plans for their poison punch, because something about the three of them huddled together sent pangs of anxiety through Shauna.

Memories of meditation circles, built largely around talk of the baby growing within Shauna, without Shauna's permission or participation.

Listening to the stillness of the woods, the absence of the sounds of civilization. A quiet that Shauna fucking hated to admit she found peaceful, because for so long she'd successfully silenced the little voice inside herself that found the suburbs too busy, that pushed for a move to somewhere more remote.

"Whispering about?" Shauna repeated, watching Tai shift gingerly, until they were face to face, their hands pressed beneath their cheeks.

"You and Jackie," Tai clarified. "Before she went outside. You were whispering about something. Or do I not want to know?"

"Oh!" Shauna felt a blush creep up her neck, staining her cheeks. "Uh… probably not?"

Tai chuckled softly, "At least you got it back." She readjusted, curling her knees closer to her chest. "Feels good, doesn't it?"

Taissa's eyes shifted softer and hazier—Shauna could practically see the reflection of Van in her pupils.

"It does," Shauna chewed at her lip. "I just… I wish I could stop being so fucking scared all the time."

"You will," Tai offered her hand, palm up in the space between them, and Shauna took it. "You're scared right now because you're not a fucking idiot. Things will settle."

Hope had always been contagious when it was offered by Tai—something rare and precious and not to be underestimated. Hope was something that Tai'd had to learn, an art she'd had to master, one that waxed and waned with her environment. But Taissa was usually correct.

She wasn't Lottie, making grand, sweeping promises of good fortune because the light of the moon had struck just right. She wasn't Van, clinging to the promise of something good, because it was the only way she could justify all the bad they'd done. She wasn't Misty, pragmatic, but confident in her ability to spin a situation beyond the need for hope. She wasn't Natalie, as optimistic as she was realistic, though she'd deny it vehemently.

And she wasn't Jackie, convinced that she could love Shauna hard enough to make anything possible.

Hope from Tai was a beacon that Shauna could usually convince herself to chase.

"I told you I thought I could live without her," Shauna laughed, stilted and thick, and ran her index finger in small circles beneath Tai's pinky. "I was so fucking wrong, Tai."

"I know you can't." Tai looked at Shauna with such sympathy it sent a shock of embarrassment through her.

Tai knew Shauna. Really knew her. There was no hiding from Taissa—she'd seen all the damage that Shauna could do firsthand, watched the way that Shauna twisted under pain and snapped under stress and lashed out harder for it. No matter how far Shauna pushed things, Taissa's love would always bend, never break.

It would've been better of Shauna to not answer Tai's question. To keep the words that Jackie had whispered in her ear in front of Tai a secret, to not burden her with how tangled things had already become, to instead ask Tai about how things with Van were going, about whether they had it back.

But Shauna was selfish. She needed to be released of the discomfort of guilt and self-doubt, and Tai was the one who held that key.

"We were… we were talking about, um…" Shauna squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, opening when Tai tapped the back of her hand with her thumb. "So… after Jackie traded herself, after we found her, I sort of… I told her that she wasn't, uh, allowed to leave me again."

Tai raised a brow, but the rest of her face remained staunchly still and wholly unreadable.

"Like… told her that she has to ask me before she, um, goes out of my sight," Shauna finished in a mumble.

"So…" Tai pursed her lips and inhaled through her nose. "So, Jackie was asking your permission to go outside? That's what you're telling me?"

"I… guess so, yeah." Shauna shrugged her shoulders up, fighting to give her best innocent look—fluttering lashes and wide eyes and slightly parted lips.

Tai was frozen. She didn't react for one, two, three seconds.

And then she laughed. She laughed so hard tears streamed down her face. Her abdomen shook. Her giggles went silent and breathy with force.

"It's not funny!" Shauna dropped Tai's hand to shove her shoulder, but laughter was already rocking her frame. She felt tears pricking at her eyes, the muscles in her cheeks burning with use. "I was being fucking insane, Tai, it's so bad!"

"You're both insane," Tai rolled onto her back, an arm above her head and her cheek pressed to the bed to keep looking at Shauna. "This is exactly why I was never worried about catching feelings for your crazy ass. You're always doing too much."

Shauna buried her face in her pillow briefly, stanching the embarrassment and the giggles in one fell swoop.

"But it isn't too much for Jackie," Tai nudged Shauna's shin with her foot until Shauna met her eyes. 'She loves that shit. You know she doesn't actually think you'll enforce it, but she asks you anyway. She's into it. She likes that you're so obsessed with her. So even if I know you meant that shit,' Tai scrunched her face in gentle disapproval, "she's having a good time."

"I think she knows," Shauna whispered.

"God, you're probably right," Tai sighed. "You two are truly meant to fucking be."

"So are you and Van." Shauna squeezed Tai's forearm and watched her pretty face twist into something excited, something conspiratorial, something that Shauna hadn't seen on her since they were teenagers and Van was hers. "Everything's gone to hell and I haven't seen you this happy in years."

“It’s good, Shauna. I feel good.”

“I think we should try and be better.” Shauna released Tai’s arm and rolled onto her back, tracing the lines and ovals etched into the logs that made up the ceiling with her eyes. “After this is over. Just… I think we can be better with them.”

“We can,” Tai said firmly. “The first runs were practice, right?”

Tai’s smile was sheepish—there was a visible awareness of the roughness of her words, the seriousness in the dark joke, the fact that they both had a spouse and a child who they’d absolutely fucked, the joint fear that they’d do it again looming between them.

No one understood Shauna like Jackie did. Jackie spoke her mood swings as a second language, could predict most of her actions with better accuracy than Shauna herself, could calm her with a simple touch, could even snap her out of her worst disassociation.

But nobody could empathize with Shauna like Taissa Turner.

“Practice,” Shauna agreed.

“Here, Shauna, just let me—”

“I’m fine, Lottie, I don’t need—”

“—just lean forward, then I can—”

“I said I’m fine, get off of me!”

Jackie and Nat took one calculating moment of pause, their eyes matching saucers, before scrambling to their feet. Taissa had just brushed past them, on a mission to extricate Van from Misty’s herbal education session, when they heard Lottie and Shauna’s disgruntled voices traveling through the small cabin.

Lottie and Shauna. Inside. Alone.

Nat and Jackie pushed through the front door together, turning sideways to squeeze their bodies awkwardly through the frame. They stumbled through the main room—Nat tripped on a stray blanket; Jackie’s shin slammed into the back of a chair in a way she knew would leave a bruise. When they passed the threshold of the bedroom, Nat had to catch Jackie by the waist, as she tipped forward with broken momentum.

Lottie was hovering over Shauna, leaning into the space where Shauna sat cross-legged on the bed with Morgan’s journal on her lap. Tai’s sweater laid abandoned beside them. Lottie held her impossibly long red scarf in both hands, stretching it out in front of Shauna’s face. Shauna batted her away like a fly.

When they noticed Jackie and Nat, they drew away from each other and blinked up at them, their faces twisted in confusion.

“Why are you running, Natalie?” Lottie asked, with a mildly concerned frown.

Lottie perched herself on the bed and thrust the scarf at Shauna from a new angle. Shauna leaned away from her and waved a hand dismissively, averting the attempt. Jackie felt nausea

rise in her stomach like a tide, the foam at the top of the wave bobbing in her throat. She knew logically that she didn't have a good read of the situation, but all she could see in her mind's eye was Lottie wrapping the fabric around Shauna's neck and pulling tight. Jackie clenched her fists at her sides.

"Jax," Shauna said, far too casually for any attempted stranglings to have occurred in their absence, "you good?"

"I—uh, yeah." Jackie swallowed, shifting her weight on the balls of her feet. "Fine, just… just checking on you."

"Are you guys good?" Nat flexed her hands against her thighs.

Jackie imagined that she was expelling the nervous energy she'd built up but had nowhere to place, now that Shauna and Lottie were acting as though there was no earthly reason to be worried about them arguing.

"No," Lottie huffed, shaking the scarf loosely in Nat's direction, "because Shauna is stubborn and unreasonable."

"I'm stubborn and unreasonable?" Shauna scoffed. "You're the one who can't take no for a fucking answer."

"I'm trying to help you, Shauna." Lottie stretched the scarf taut and placed one side around Shauna's shoulder and suddenly Jackie understood. Lottie was trying to make Shauna a sling. "So just let me—" Lottie leaned closer, halfway to tying a successful knot around Shauna's upper body.

"I'm fine." Shauna smacked Lottie's thigh with barely any force, but it was enough to make Lottie jump and lose progress. "I don't need it!"

"I'm trying to have a moment here," Lottie insisted. 'We need to heal this… rift between us,' Lottie gritted her teeth and managed to loop the fabric under Shauna's armpit, "if we're going to rely on each other!"

"No, I—what?" Shauna launched herself off the bed and kicked a leg in the air to force distance between them. 'That's not it, Lot.' She rolled her eyes, planting her foot back on the ground. "I mean I feel… like it feels better. I think maybe… it's, like, fine now?"

"What do you mean?" Jackie jumped at Shauna as Lottie had before, but Shauna didn't squirm away from her. Shauna held perfectly still for Jackie as she clawed at the hem of her shirt, pushing it up as fast as she could, until the pristine white bandage was visible. "Did you lose feeling or something? That might be bad, Shauna! You should've told me!"

"No, baby, I can feel it," Shauna sighed. Jackie watched the muscles in her back tense and shift, as she crossed her arms to cover her chest, something that she wouldn't have dared to even attempt with the pain she'd been in just hours earlier. "It's a little sore, but it feels mostly fine now."

"Put the scarf down, princess," Nat said sternly, holding a hand up in Lottie's direction. She joined Jackie behind Shauna, tracing a finger along the uppermost edge of Shauna's bandage lightly. "Should we get Misty?" she asked, her eyes fixed on Jackie as though the question was inarguably hers to answer.

“No!” Shauna snapped. “It’s fine like it is. We don’t need her fucking with it.”

“I want to check it.” Jackie pinched one corner of the thick tape that secured the bandage just enough to have a grip on it but hesitated to pull.

She bowed her head and dropped a kiss to the left of the wound, directly over Shauna’s spine. Shauna breathed deep, her ribcage expanding with it. Jackie felt Natalie shift, heard her sink down on the creaky mattress next to Lottie.

“Can I look at it?” Jackie gripped Shauna’s waist with her free hand and kissed her skin again, right of center, the corner of her lips grazing silky tape. “I’ll fix it after. Misty won’t have to mess with it again. I just want to see.”

Shauna nodded slow, the ends of her hair shifting and catching against the folds in the bunched-up fabric of her flannel. Jackie brushed Shauna’s hair in front of her shoulders, out of the way, and peeled the bandage off slowly.

“Well?” Shauna asked. “Is it a little better?”

Jackie blinked. Closed her eyes so tight it hurt and snapped them open. Shook her head to clear it.

“It’s… it’s more than a little better.”

Mere hours ago, there had been a deep, angry crater in Shauna’s muscle. Layers of skin that peeled back unevenly, held together poorly with minuscule pieces of medical something-or-other, in an attempt to hide the shreds of beefy red and lines of sinewy pink that looked almost pale somehow. (Steri-strips, that’s what Misty had called them, it’s like makeshift stitches, she’d said and Jackie had clenched her jaw against the way the term makeshift applied to everything they were doing for Shauna.)

Jackie knew what had been there before. She’d cataloged it through tears collecting in front of her eyes that she refused to let fall out of sheer force of will. She’d learned to tend to it, taking Misty’s orders in and processing them through the fucking screaming, crashing, flaming noise in her head.

But in front of her now, dancing across Shauna’s right shoulder blade like a line traced by a thick red marker, was something entirely different. The same length as the wound had been last time she’d seen it—shorter than the one across her own chest—but so narrow that Jackie could hardly trust her eyes.

It looked as though Shauna had a fucking scratch.

A deep one—one you’d get from sliding your back against a protruding nail in a shed or catching on blackberry bushes that you were trying to crawl through. But not something that could make you lose so much blood you went scary pale. Not something that could lead you to death’s door. Nothing serious, nothing that called for more than some neosporin and an extra-large band-aid.

Jackie gripped Shauna’s hips to guide her into shifting slightly, then she stepped aside for Nat and Lottie to see.

“Holy fuck,” Nat muttered, shocked but exhausted, like she wasn’t sure how many miracles she could take.

“Huh,” Lottie said simply. “I guess you don’t need a sling.”

“Told you,” Shauna grumbled—seven-year-old Shauna, sticking her tongue out at her brothers, putting her hands on her hips, pursing her lips. “Is it… is there anything there, Jax? What does it look like?”

“I’ll…” Jackie cleared her throat. “I’ll, um, take a picture on my phone. But it’s essentially a…”

Jackie pulled at the middle of one of the tiny, blood-stained strips where it had lifted away from Shauna’s skin, transfixed. The tape had once been working overtime, stretching to keep the healthy tissue on either side of the gash as close to closed as possible, but now it had slack. Space where it had curved out, because the crater that it had been reaching across had somehow vanished completely.

“It’s essentially a goddamn scratch,” Nat finished for her.

“Totally healed?” Misty scoffed. “Because there’s a difference between looking better and being completely healed, you know. Shauna, pull your shirt up so that I can—”

“No,” Shauna yanked the hem of her top down stubbornly. ‘I don’t need you to check right now. These three already saw it, so if you don’t mind’ Misty crept toward Shauna and Shauna slammed her back against the armchair, “—if you don’t mind,” she repeated firmly, “I’d like to keep my fucking shirt on for once.”

“Okay, it wasn’t totally healed,” Jackie clarified. “But it’s just, like… barely anything now. Seriously.”

Jackie wrapped an arm around Shauna’s shoulders protectively. Her body was warm in Shauna’s lap, against her chest, behind her neck. Shauna knew that they were acting like teenagers, Jackie perching herself in Shauna’s lap whenever the chance arose, but she simply couldn’t bring herself to give a fuck.

Jeff had once tried to get Shauna to match that energy—pawing at her hips, clawing at her arms, dragging her close at the parties he forced her to go to in their twenties, claiming that he was simply following her therapist’s advice to try and get out. To the mall or a community pool or a fucking Barnes and Noble—that’s what Shauna’s therapist had meant. Not Randy fucking Walsh’s basement parties for Wiskayok High alum who peaked in high school. But she’d gone, just enough times to appease him, and he’d tried to sweet talk her into Jackie’s role. The role that Jackie had taken with both of them—clinging to biceps and splaying across laps and giggling in ears.

Shauna was not that girl. Shauna had never and would never be that girl. Shauna didn’t like PDA. She thought it was tacky. That was what she’d told him (and herself).

Except Jeff had made solid arguments to the contrary—her interest in public sex, namely, though she’d retorted that it was different, that no one was supposed to see them, really, especially nobody they knew. Jeff had mentioned Jackie one time, drunk and bold, spitting with the force of his words—you never complained when Jackie was all over you, like you were her fucking boyfriend or something.

Shauna had shoved him backwards with such force that his head had thudded against a wall. A small split had formed on his scalp, and he'd whined like a goddamn baby about it. It'd stained his straw-yellow hair red, made a mess of his shirt and his car and everything else that Shauna knew she'd have to clean later, just as she had to clean the tiny cut with isopropyl alcohol that she found under Randy and Tammy's sink, while Jeff sniffled like a little bitch.

He was right, though.

Shauna had never minded when Jackie was all over her. When Jackie wrapped Shauna's arms around her waist and demanded that Shauna sway to the beat with her. When Jackie got drunk enough to plant herself in Shauna's lap, when she leaned back and whispered in Shauna's ear, when she checked to make sure that nobody was watching them and shifted her hips to find a taste of friction against Shauna's thigh. Shauna had always fucking loved every second of it—the larger the audience, the better. And that hadn't changed.

Shauna secured her arms around Jackie's waist and let her head rest against Jackie's shoulder.

"So… okay, let's just call it what it is, yeah?" Van crackled her knuckles methodically, nervously, a little bit excitedly. "Shauna's arm looked like it was hanging on by a fucking thread. Her shoulder was seriously fucked. Jackie cuts her chest, and hours later it's a little fucking scratch? I mean… that's what happened, right?"

"Maybe we were seeing things," Tai argued, though Shauna knew that her heart wasn't in it. It was rote—a knee-jerk denial, the last stand before she let herself fall back into things. "We've had… mass hallucinations before, who's to say we weren't exaggerating the injury in the first place?"

"I'm pretty fucking sure," Shauna said. "I'm the one who had it. I never imagined pain that wasn't there. If anything, I imagined things weren't as bad as they were."

"It was real," Jackie insisted. "I don't… I've never had the hallucinations. Not like you guys. It was real."

"I'm with Jackie," Nat grumbled. She dug at the cuticle of her thumbnail roughly with her index finger, until Lottie put a hand over hers to stop the motion. "I mean, I hallucinated some but… not like that. And we're not… we aren't starving or whatever. Most of us didn't… see shit when we weren't."

Lottie said aloud what Nat had left unspoken, "Shauna and I are the only ones who would hallucinate under these conditions."

Shauna nodded reluctantly, Lottie's deep brown eyes boring into her own.

"So… do we think this could fix some things?" Van asked, her voice forced calm.

"I think…" Jackie took a deep breath and the group hung on it. Misty and Lottie shifted subtly closer to Nat on either side of her, Tai leaned into Van's space until they were pressed together. "That's a very dangerous thing to wonder about."

"We're never gaining." Lottie shook her head vehemently. Her bangs needed a trim—they hung down past her eyebrows, brushing the tips of her long lashes as they swayed. "We'll

always be in debt. It throws us bones so that we don't forget what's real. Everything we give it is basic satiation. None of it is going to reap us rewards."

"You didn't used to think about it like that," Nat said. "You used to fucking… worship this shit."

"Not worship. Revere. And I still revere it," Lottie said defensively. "But… I used to think a lot of things. We grow, we learn, we stop twisting apathy into benevolence to cope."

Lottie shrugged and Nat seemed to be mulling her words over, her lips twisting in thought.

"Are we really just talking about it like its real now?" Tai asked the group at large, scanning their faces. "Nat?"

"I dunno, Tai," Nat sighed heavily. "Shauna's back looks like it's been healing for fucking months. It's… bizarre."

Nat had always been the one that Shauna could count on to question shit. The one who called out the clearly absurd, to tell the group when she saw them making fantastical excuses for their own horrifying behavior. Taissa and Shauna wavered when they needed to—be it out of hope or fear or strategy. But if Natalie couldn't muster up an argument for a dose of realism, none of them could.

Shauna hooked two fingers through Jackie's belt loop, tethering them together.

"Jackie?" Tai asked.

"I…" Jackie cleared her throat and shifted her weight. She gripped Shauna's collar and ran her thumb back and forth across the fabric. "I think that some of it is real, yeah. But I think a lot of it was just… us."

Jackie grouping herself in with the rest of them was charitable. Crazy, even. She'd resolutely refused to join them and they'd shunned her for that. It was only after time spent in fucking solitary confinement that she'd started to buy in.

"But… I don't know. I always thought we'd sort of made a deal with the Devil, honestly." Jackie shrugged.

Shauna craned her neck to get a better look at Jackie. Her expression was casual and her tone was neutral.

"What does that mean?" Misty asked slowly. She was cross-legged, her thigh brushing Nat's. She leaned forward, clinging to her knees with an iron grip. "The Devil?"

"Not, like, the literal Devil, obviously. Not Old Testament shit. It's…" Jackie frowned, her eyes sweeping left to right to take in all of their expectant faces. Shauna let her thumb fall just beneath her waistband, drawing circles against her skin to encourage her. "Um… so, we all made sacrifices for each other, right? Shauna bled for me, I bled for her. I think that… that everyone who survived did something of the sort, yeah?"

There were nods and murmurs of agreement.

"So… I think we made offerings when we did that. And those offerings bound us to it," Jackie continued. "We signed a fucking contract without reading the fine print, or something.

I mean, we just don't die. How many of us have been in situations where we should've died since we got back? Or… or situations where we wanted to die. I know I have. And something always intervenes."

There was an unnatural silence in the room. Nat's nose twitched. Lottie and Misty both moved closer to her for a second time. Van and Taissa made intense eye contact, communicating something that Shauna couldn't have interpreted, even if she'd tried to. And Shauna… well, Shauna heard Jackie's voice ringing in her ears—wanted to die, wanted to die, wanted to die—until Jackie spoke again.

"We can't die unless it wants us dead. I think we were meant to die out there, but… we made a deal with the Devil, and now we're in, like, limbo."

Van broke the quiet spell first, "Damn, Jackie."

"Well, that's fucking dark." Nat leaned back against the wall, the ghost of a grin playing on her lips, and stretched her legs out in front of her. "Little Miss Team Spirit thinks we're doomed to live in purgatory, until the motherfucking Devil calls us home."

"It's compelling," Misty muttered, the gears clearly churning so quickly in her head they were almost audible. Shauna had no idea whether she was actually considering it—Misty was someone that Shauna had never been able to read when it came to this shit.

But to be fair, Shauna still had no idea where she herself fell when it came to this shit. She just nodded into Jackie's shoulder. A safe move. An acceptable reaction. A quiet affirmation, not necessarily of what Jackie had said being inarguably true, but of it being as logical as anything else they'd come across.

"How come she says it and it's compelling," the corner of Lottie's mouth pulled back in a small smile, "but if I'd said it, it would've been crazy Lottie."

Laughter broke the heaviness like a tonic.

Jackie and Shauna untangled themselves just long enough to make the group dinner and shovel down their portions, before Jackie coaxed Shauna into laying in front of the fire with her head in Jackie's lap. No one argued, no one fought, no one brought it up. Their evening was peaceful for once, in spite of—or maybe because of—their surroundings. Shauna relished in it—watching Tai and Van play cards, listening to Nat and Lottie speak low and slow to each other, feeling Jackie's fingers twist cold-stubborn asters through the braids she wove into her hair.

And Misty, as it turned out, had a plan to keep the mood of the night intact.

33. wild and free

1997

"Lottie?" Shauna's voice was timid. Meek, even.

She always got this way when they did this. Sips of the punch steeped her rough edges, until she was as soft as the dregs of mushrooms that formed the drink itself. Not a fighter. Not a girl who could bind ankles, raise up game, slit throats, watch blood fall.

Shauna was so gentle on these nights it made Laura Lee's voice ring in Lottie's ears.

Always this way on these nights, but usually not this close to Lottie. Shauna had begun forcing distance between them ages ago. Distance between herself and everyone, really, save Taissa. She had become territorial and suspicious, had stopped indulging Lottie's attempts to hold her in place.

But tonight she was there, inches away, the space between them one of damp dirt, of fledgling blades of grass, of inaugural summer air, too chilly to warrant their dresses with thin straps, their shorts cut off at the knee, but too warm not to enjoy against bare skin after the harsh winter, the long false hope of a spring.

It was only when Shauna tried her name again that Lottie realized she'd gotten lost.

"Lottie?"

When Lottie snapped her head in Shauna's direction, everything lagged. The barely lit trees, flickering beneath campfire and torchfire, seemed to reach out with extra branches, to unfurl with duplicate hazy leaves. Lottie turned onto her side to try and make up for it, to balance what she was seeing, and realized again that she'd gotten lost when Nat slipped off of her chest, thrown from her perch on her other side.

But Natalie wouldn't mind. She was fine these nights. Free. Lottie heard Mari call to Nat softly, felt the warmth of Nat's body move further from her as she crawled in Mari's direction, zeroed in on the warmth of Shauna in front of her.

Shauna's eyes were so wide. Tears leaked from them, dripping silently onto her cheeks, her chin. Lottie cradled the side of Shauna's head, ran her thumb back and forth against her scalp, pressed her lips along the path of every saltwater stream, until Shauna stopped crying and started whimpering.

"Yes, Shauna?" she asked, finally, when enough time had passed that the rest of the forest had come back into Lottie's awareness—Mari's quiet pants, Nat's hitched breaths, Taissa and Van falling from laughter to lilting moans and back again.

Sounds beyond those, too. Girl noises and animal noises and noises of the wilderness itself. Lottie felt vulnerable to it, suddenly. Overwhelmed by the gravity of it, with Shauna Shipman clutching her wrist to hold her hand in place, wriggling close, so close they were nose to nose, chest to chest, knee to knee.

“Do you ever hear her?” Shauna whispered.

Lottie paused. Thought of a *her* that she knew was wrong. Of blonde hair so fair, of the softest skin she’d ever felt, of collared dresses pinched between her fingers.

Shauna dug her nails into Lottie’s flesh and whimpered again, and Lottie didn’t want to keep chasing her tears, didn’t want to follow sorrow down her neck and her chest, didn’t want to watch her break, just this once.

So Lottie whispered back, “Yes.”

Shauna went from close to closer, pressed until there was no space left to fill, put her body into Lottie’s hands with a yearning, unbridled desperation for comfort that Lottie couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen Shauna allow herself.

Shauna didn’t just allow. She searched. She searched with her tongue and her lips and her fingers, with hips moving roughly and nose pressing gently, with her heart pounding fiercely against Lottie’s own.

And when Lottie finally wrangled her, when she soothed her into enough stillness to drink her down, a tonic much more curative than the one made over the fire hours ago, Shauna lay babbling. Beseeching not Lottie, but a girl who couldn’t hear her pleas. A girl who never would’ve let her reach the point of pleading, who would’ve offered herself up before Shauna ever even thought to ask.

A girl who, when the light was right and Lottie’s mind was not, sometimes reminded Lottie of another, one she missed enough to weave these nights into her own supplication.

December 30th, 2021

Misty sat up on her knees suddenly, her hands clutching tight to her thighs. “We found… something else,” she announced.

Nat, her back against the wall by the fireplace, her knees hugged against her chest, her hand wound in the fringe of Lottie’s shawl, raised a brow at the movement, providing enough encouragement for Misty to go on.

“When we were out collecting the hemlock.”

“Fuck, Misty,” Van groaned. Her head laid in Taissa’s lap, her hair fanned out and caught with static against Taissa’s sweater. It made her look young, made her protest sound slightly petulant. “I thought we decided *no* on that one, remember?”

Tai sat up straighter on the couch, the hand she’d been dragging idly across Van’s back stiling against her. “No on what one?”

Shauna wrapped an arm around Jackie’s middle, pulling her even tighter against her chest. Jackie relaxed into the protective motion, premature as it may be, and let her head loll back onto Shauna’s shoulder. There was a haze about the evening. Something to do with the knowledge that they stood on the precipice of disaster, that they were about to make the

events of the last month look like child's play, that death and prison were both very fitting parties to be seated at the table that would decide their futures.

Jackie played with Shauna's hand where it lay against her belly. She stretched Shauna's fingers out, ran the pads of her own in the spaces between them, circled against Shauna's nails as if polishing them.

"Yes, we *did*, but…" Misty shrugged. Nat let her knee sway to the side, prodding Misty's hip gently. "I don't know. I thought maybe the group should decide."

"Decide what?" Lottie asked, gentle and curious.

Shauna, her breath warm against Jackie's temple, spoke nearly the same words at nearly the same time, "Decide on what?"

But Shauna was alarmed rather than gentle, not so much curious as impatient.

Misty shrunk slightly, but she righted herself just as quickly, rolling her shoulders back and swallowing down any apprehension that Shauna had caused in her with her Misty-brand of stubbornness.

"I'll show you."

Misty seemed to possess energy that the rest of them had let run down to fumes over busy hours, busy days, busy weeks. She was *not* leaning into the spell of recuperation that seemed to have fallen over the rest of them. No, Misty was determined to make even their last hours before reckoning a *project.*

Jackie watched with mild amusement as she scurried off to the pantry.

"Fucking Misty," Shauna muttered in Jackie's ear, low enough that none of the others could hear.

She used a tone that had once been so well worn, one that had fallen out of her mouth on bus rides and in locker rooms, and later in corners of the cabin where they'd carved out space. Jackie chuckled. She twisted her head to press a kiss to the front of Shauna's neck, the closest skin she could reach. Relished in the pure delight of giving into the urges she'd had to fight all the other times Shauna had done something as simple as snark quietly about Misty fucking Quigley.

"Fucking *shrooms?"*

Misty was back in the center of the room, and Nat was announcing the contents of the bag that lay in front of her to the rest of them.

"Oh my *God,"* Tai muttered. Her eyes fell into an easy roll and her hand resumed slow, smooth motions against Van's back.

Shauna laughed, as did Van, but Lottie perked up more than Jackie would've expected her to in her stupor. She straightened her jacket, smoothing the fabric down with ringed fingers.

"Do we even know they're *that* kind?" Lottie jerked her head toward the paper bag with forced nonchalance.

Nat sighed. She leaned closer, widening her eyes almost comically as she scanned them, and flopped back down. “We do, yeah.”

“We are *not,”* Tai said. It was rote. Almost firm, but lacking the necessary bite to make it so.

Nat caught Jackie’s eye, twisting her lips into the same conspiratorial half smile she’d taken when she’d pulled Jackie aside their very first night together, flashing her the little baggie of white pills in the breast pocket of her flannel button up, like candy squirreled away from a strict mother.

Jackie felt as struck as she had then—like seventeen and stupid, seriously considering what she normally wouldn’t have entertained for a moment. There was a sense of fruition settling in, the quiet madness of a circle of friends falling deeper into a night. It was both innocent and not. Equal parts joints passed between greedy fingers, blowbacks of smoke in dark basements, and berries rotting and fermented, a party made of sticks and leaves, arranged in part to tempt death into sinking her fingers in once and for all.

Or, you know, it was just sheer stupidity. A perfect illustration of one of the greatest flaws of the human condition.

That’s what Jackie tried telling herself, shaking her head slightly at Nat’s curious look. Nat who was sort of sober right now, anyway. Nat who, like all of them, should have far greater priorities than getting high in the fucking woods right now.

Shauna wasn’t speaking, Jackie realized suddenly.

None of them were. Jackie had been waiting on the admonishment, expecting Shauna’s *I’m being reasonable* voice to pick up the slack where Jackie had found herself unable to decline.

But in its place there was mostly silence. Silence for a beat too long, then the hiss of a campstove, the rolling boil of water, and the crinkle of a paper bag, upturned and shaken out.

“There’s some blackberries in the shed,” Lottie suggested. “You know, for—” her words trailed to nothing, her long fingers filling in the blanks as she swiped them just above her eyes, her cheeks, her lips, in near meditative succession. “Just like before.”

Lottie opened her eyes abruptly and shrugged. Tai and Van raised their brows at each other from across the room, stifling laughter, but Shauna thought she saw the tiniest of sparks reflected in Jackie’s eyes when Lottie’s flashed open.

Nat snorted and sunk deeper into the flimsy couch, her legs stretching out in front of her. “Yeah, except this time they’re in fucking Whole Foods bags.”

Gone was any pretense that they *weren’t* doing this. Gone was the inhibition that had been flimsy at best for weeks, the last remains of sane decision making. In the place of reason and ration was Misty Quigley, stirring a pot with a collapsible camp spoon that had come from a neatly maintained, emergency preparedness storage room in Lottie Matthew’s arguably magical beachfront home—no logic for the wicked.

“I think it’s ready,” Misty announced, sitting back on her heels.

When Shauna looked at her, she saw a flash of a ghost that nearly choked her—of hair much darker, eyes much softer, hands much more deft.

“Babe?” Jackie palmed Shauna’s cheek.

Shauna blinked Mari away, focusing instead on the flecks of brown among the green that lay scattered in Jackie’s doe eyes, as Jackie scanned her face for answers.

The question was expansive. It was *are you okay?* and *can you hear me right now?* and *are we doing this?* With one word, Jackie was offering Shauna a dozen outs. Shauna ought to have taken one of them. Claimed dissociation or overwhelming emotion or a sudden rush of reason, but her head bobbed in a nod, rather than shook.

“I think we’re meant to,” she said softly.

Cups were poured and passed. It was reverent and slow, and Shauna tried to think of red plastic and kegs of beer rather than the sort of ritual they were planning on initiating the very next day.

“I never did them the first time,” Jackie said, peering into the steam that billowed up from her cup. “But I don’t have… particularly *good* associations with it.”

Lottie drank first. Misty and Nat followed in near-perfect tandem. Taissa and Van waited, watching Shauna and Jackie respectively.

Shauna pulled Jackie close, tugging Jackie’s hips against her own with one hand and holding her own drink away from her body with the other, her arm outstretched as if to put it out of Jackie’s field of vision entirely.

“We don’t have to,” Shauna said. In that moment she was what Jackie had been in so many prior—promising Shauna that she didn’t care if they skipped the harder stuff, assuring her that if she was already drunk there was no reason she had to take more sips just because of whatever stupid game they were playing.

Lottie flitted closer. She combed her hand through Jackie’s hair and Shauna watched as Jackie leaned into it, a cat stretching closer to the last rays of a setting sun. Nat drew Lottie away, into an embrace of her own, and eyed Shauna carefully, as though waiting for her to snap.

“You have Shauna,” Lottie said dreamily. She slid her arms tighter around Natalie’s waist, but kept her face turned toward Jackie. “You two are bound. *And* you understand the ties, now. You’ll be fine if you want to.”

Lottie reached for Shauna. She ran two fingers against the inside of Shauna’s wrist, causing Shauna’s cup to sway slightly, before burying her face in Nat’s hair and mumbling the rest of her lecture, in a way that made it unclear whether she was talking to Jackie, or Shauna, or both.

“It might even be healing for you.”

Shauna caught Van and Tai out of the corner of her eye, watched as they clinked their glasses together and threw them back.

"You're usually suspicious of this shit," Jackie said.

Shauna inhaled deep. "It's all starting to feel a little… meant to be, almost. Not… not that I'm happy about the bad shit, just… *this* brought us back together."

Shauna felt her cheeks heat up, flushing almost uncomfortably. Jackie released her death-grip on her cup, freeing one hand to place it against Shauna's chest, and it cooled Shauna through.

"*All of this* brought us back together." Shauna jerked her head back, toward the knock-off cabin, toward the other women, who were beginning a slow shuffle outside. "I can't be upset about that, no matter how much I hate the… *woo-woo bullshit* of it all. But we don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

Jackie smiled the purest smile she possessed, the one that lit up rooms, opened doors, made *certain* people insane for the entirety of their lives, and all Shauna felt was adoration. Pure, simple, clean.

"Open your mouth," Jackie instructed.

Shauna did, perhaps too easily. The rim of Jackie's cup hit her lower lip, the heady flavor of earth her tongue, and she swallowed it down greedily.

Jackie followed suit, guiding Shauna's hand to her mouth, and the moment her own throat finished bobbing, her lips were on Shauna's. Her hands were on her, too, wandering from shoulders to waist to hips.

"It takes a while to kick in," Shauna giggled against her.

"Mmmm," Jackie kissed her all over—her face, her neck, her chest, where Jackie paused to bury her face against her, "no, I'm pretty sure it's already hitting me. I can't control myself."

They were the last outside, Shauna pausing to bundle Jackie in a coat before allowing her through the door, and it wasn't long after they'd settled themselves in front of the bonfire that control truly was lost.

Shauna was starting to feel the woozy, otherworldly sway of it all, busying herself with what felt like the essential task of the moment—braiding Jackie's hair the way that Jackie had braided her own before they'd even begun the night, leaning forward every few seconds to kiss her neck or pull at her ear gently with her teeth, losing her grip and backtracking a knot or two each time.

Something shifted, footsteps from the others crunching down on leaves and twigs, giggles surrounding them, and Shauna gave up on the task completely, shaking Jackie's hair loose between her fingers, burying her nose against her scalp and inhaling, sweetness and earth and metallic traces of blood.

"Look!" Van's shout of joy was everything. It was winning states, it was the first sighting of the lake all those years ago, it was Nat and Travis appearing on the horizon, hauling a deer between them. Van held something over her head in triumph as she ran toward them from the direction of the nearest shed, Taissa and Lottie flanking her, near skipping. "The crazy fuckers brought a goddamn boom box!"

The song was one that Jackie recognized, but couldn't quite place.

It was new, Jackie thought. Something she wouldn't have thought of as being released on a CD. Something Sadie had probably played in the car—she was always disconnecting Jackie's phone from bluetooth to connect her own the moment her butt hit the seat.

It had a beat that they could dance to, a tempo quick enough to act as a pressure valve for the pent up nerves, the unreleased fear, the unspoken thrill of it all. A woman's voice, melodic and full, seemed to guide Jackie's feet as she danced around the fire, though Jackie could only make out one word. One that kept repeating, one that *bore* repeating: free.

It was perfect—*and,* Jackie thought, in a wild fit of stubbornness, in a drug-induced willingness to admit to herself what she'd felt so deeply but pushed away just as fiercely over the past weeks, whenever she watched Van comfort Lottie, or Taissa and Natalie split a cigarette, or Misty and Shauna bicker about semantics, *so were they.*

Perfect.

Perfect, and free, and meant to be there. *Exactly* there, swinging in each other's arms, singing lyrics exceptionally loud and almost certainly wrong, planting heavy kisses on cheeks and holding hands in tight grips, linking pinkies and joining elbows, worried about nothing and no one, togetherness as a verb, as an act, as everything.

Shauna and Nat passed into orbit, a blurred mess of limbs in motion, and Van spun Jackie once more before passing her straight into Shauna's arms. Van took Nat's hands into her own and laughed, the sound of it loud and bright and unafraid, and Jackie watched over Shauna's shoulder as she and Nat seemed to flicker in and out of reality behind the open flame.

Shauna dipped Jackie back suddenly, part of the dance that Jackie hadn't even realized they'd been doing, and Jackie squealed, locking her arms tight around Shauna's neck. Jackie saw Lottie and Misty and Taissa then—fragmented, upside down from her warped perspective, so beautiful it hurt—and when Shauna whipped her back upright, their faces just inches apart, the sounds of the other women joyous and unrestrained around them, Jackie truly understood what it felt like to get off on the boring, back to the land bullshit.

"I was thinking the other day…"

Jackie leaned closer, until all of her weight was in Shauna's arms. (Arms that were actually strong enough to hold Jackie up, thanks to the flesh that Jackie had opened and the blood that she'd spilled.) Her nose pressed against the side of Shauna's neck. Cold, but not so much so that Shauna worried, and that in itself was a small miracle.

Jackie seemed to have forgotten that she'd been speaking at all, her words shifting to quiet hums, their sound absorbed by Shauna's skin.

"That's never good," Shauna said, in a force of a habit so old she felt it rise out of her bones.

Riding a bike, dribbling a soccer ball, teasing Jackie as she pulled her closer. Memory that moved Shauna's muscles and used her voice, without her say. It felt good. It felt like this was cementing them, like everything that had driven space between, then and now, was finally being washed away, like they'd never stopped being *JackieandShauna*.

"Maybe not," Jackie giggled, "but I do it anyway."

Jackie pulled back, her eyes shining and her cheeks pink. Her hair skimmed her forehead and her cheeks in a beautiful mess, and Shauna was struck by the same rush she'd felt on their first night with everyone together—Jackie clinging to Shauna, leading her to the bathroom and jumping her, an eager reenactment of every high school party they'd ever attended.

Except this wasn't secret. This was out in the open. This was the same freedom that being *out there* had allowed them. They could shout at the moon—and they had, Nat and Lottie tipping their heads back and missing a howl by a small margin before collapsing onto the dirt together—with no one to judge them for it.

There was no weight of expectation, no fear of repercussion that had been so stifling hot when Jackie and Shauna had contorted themselves into guest bathrooms and walk-in closets and backseats. Shame that Shauna had once thought that Jackie was responsible for, rather than a victim of. Feelings so strong and so intrinsically tangled up with Jackie, that Shauna had oh so fucking foolishly assigned her blame. That shame was a distant memory here.

Shauna took Jackie's cheeks between her hands and kissed her forehead so firmly that Jackie stumbled backwards, just because she could.

"Tell me what you were thinking?" Shauna asked, almost shy. She kissed Jackie's cold-chapped lips twice, for good measure.

"I was thinking," Jackie chewed her lip and fluttered her lashes, nervous, 'something I've thought a lot of times but… but then it was just some crazy fantasy,' Jackie buried her face back in the crook of Shauna's neck suddenly, her fingers trailing up to play with the zipper on Shauna's sweatshirt, "and now I know I was right."

Jackie hummed again, and just as Shauna was about to inform her that she hadn't actually answered anything, Jackie spoke, quiet and timid, "Or I… *think* I was."

Shauna dislodged Jackie, coaxing her out of her hiding spot so she could plant kisses along her jaw.

"No." Jackie wove her fingers through Shauna's hair. Shauna could hear the smile in her voice. "No, I know I was right."

"You still haven't told me what it was," Shauna reminded her, though Shauna's foggy mind had already taken her from hanging on Jackie's words with anticipation, to wondering how she could get Jackie comfortably on the ground, because standing was rapidly becoming far too difficult.

"I was thinking how… do you remember when we did, um… do you remember doomcoming?"

Jackie was giving up the practice of pretending that she didn't remember. Everyone seemed to be, slipping deeper into honesty with every night they spent together, every fucked

up thing they did for and with each other. It should've frightened Shauna, even Jackie's walls crumbling down, but it was a comfort.

"Of course," Shauna answered. "Well, all the parts before the drugs. Most of the parts after."

Like she'd seen Mari so clearly before, Shauna saw a spot of blood on a mossy green dress, a set of horns that some part of her knew weren't really there, a blade digging into Travis's throat.

"Can we sit?" she blurted out. She dropped, landing cross-legged and tugging down on Jackie's hands, before Jackie could even begin to answer.

"Are you okay?" Jackie hovered over her, kneeling and fussing and touching. Shauna hummed and swayed. "Do you feel dizzy or… or weird or anything?"

"We're on shrooms, Jax," Shauna giggled. 'In the woods.' Shauna kissed the first part of Jackie's skin that she could reach—light pecks in quick succession to the hollow between her collarbones, her nose brushing against the bandage that lay there on her descent. "And you're here. *Really* here. I feel a little weird."

"Well, yeah. But… other than that." Jackie cradled Shauna's head in a way that made Shauna's eyes fall closed, as if by the press of a button. Everything was hazy, spinning. All Shauna knew were the places that Jackie's body touched hers. 'God, I shouldn't have let you take this shit,' Jackie whined. "What the fuck was I thinking?"

Jackie tried to sit on the ground beside Shauna, but Shauna grumbled her dissent, taking Jackie by the hips and pulling her down onto her lap with a heavy thud.

"Shauna!" Jackie squealed. She caught herself, landing sideways, one hand planted in the dirt beside Shauna's hip, the other wrapped tight around her neck.

"No." Shauna wound her arms around Jackie's waist. 'Ground's cold.' She snuggled in closer, slid her cheek against the bare skin of Jackie's chest rhythmically. "I'm glad I took it. I feel like… like it's, um, fixing me a little, maybe. Like… like it's making reality easier to… sort of, uh, recognize? As… as real." Shauna pressed her forehead against Jackie's breastbone to mask her blush. "It's dumb. It doesn't make sense, I know, but—"

"It's not dumb." Jackie kissed the top of Shauna's head and Shauna counted the pecks—*one*, *two*, *three*—until she lost count completely. Jackie's reply was broken, delivered in fragments between the kisses that seemed to be her true priority. "There's probably some rich woman pretending to be a hippy who's selling that healing course right now, and she doesn't even know she's onto something real."

"Lottie should do that," Shauna mumbled. "She'd make so much money."

Jackie laughed, and the vibration of it made Shauna draw back to look at her. "She doesn't need it."

"Mmm," Shauna agreed.

Jackie was so beautiful. She had the kind of beauty that made the world stop, that distracted and comforted and—and fucking *healed* and—oh, Jackie had been trying to make a point, hadn't she? And now that Shauna remembered that, she was gripped with the need to

know exactly what Jackie had been trying to say, the insatiable urge she'd had since they were kids—to open Jackie up, to look inside, to touch and interrogate and inhibit every part of her.

Shauna cleared her throat. "What were you thinking? Before?"

"Oh." Jackie's face flinched—a furrow of her brow, a twitch of her nose, a frown pulling at her lips, all so slight and brief, reset so quickly that Shauna shouldn't have been able to catch it in the dark.

But it was Jackie. It was Jackie, now—Jackie returned to Shauna, Jackie who Shauna had learned she couldn't truly live without, Jackie who Shauna had spent more years missing than having—so Shauna caught it all. She cataloged it. She sunk her fingers into it and held fast. She gripped too tight, internalized too much.

She held her breath.

"I was thinking that it would've been a nice wedding," Jackie said.

Shauna forgot to keep holding her breath and exhaled with too much sound. Jackie shrugged sweetly, then she pitched her body forward, reclaiming Shauna's body as her hideout. Shauna caught their weight with a hand outstretched behind her. The ground was damp from the snowmelt. The dirt gave way beneath her fingers. Centimeters of sunkenness, in reality, but Shauna envisioned a plummet down, down, *down*, with Jackie held tight to her chest. Trees growing taller, stars dimmer, sound fainter, as they sank into the earth.

Shauna laid flat on her back, not daring to allow any slack in her grip on Jackie. Jackie squeaked, but adapted, making herself a vine around Shauna's trunk. Her weight pressed down on Shauna, but the ground cushioned them, rather than crumbling away.

"Doomcoming, I mean," Jackie continued.

A halo of light seemed to stretch from her, a beacon that glowed and tempted, one that Shauna knew somehow was just for her, *special* for her, that none of the others would be able to see. She traced it with a shaky hand, hovering near Jackie's waist. The light was brighter there, where Jackie's shirt had ridden up to expose a sliver of her skin.

"For out there. Not the soup, or the hallucinations, or whatever."

Shauna couldn't remember what Jackie was talking about. *Important,* she chastised herself. It was important, and she had forgotten, but how could she not when Jackie was hovering over her, blanketed in golden light—too bright, too beautiful to look at directly without sacrificing something. Like risking blindness to watch a solar eclipse, like third degree burns on fingertips that couldn't resist the impulse to touch still-molten blown glass.

"But… but for *out there*, we really made something special."

Doomcoming, Shauna reminded herself. She repeated it silently, until the word sounded fake. Until she remembered that the word *was* fake. *Jackie's talking about doomcoming.*

"It was pretty," Jackie said. "The stars were—"

Shauna, overcome with raw need, raised her head far enough off of the ground to kiss Jackie. She flicked her tongue against Jackie's bottom lip, let her teeth scrape lightly, but

pulled back almost immediately, terrified of just how badly she wanted to sink her teeth in.

"—and we made the decorations and we—"

Again. Neck reaching, tongue seeking, teeth grazing. Then a lurch of fear in her stomach, drawing away. But this time, Jackie moaned into Shauna's mouth when Shauna bit down on her lip.

"—dressed up and… y'know—"

Again, harder. Another moan from Jackie, louder. The faintest taste of blood on Shauna's tongue.

"—as good—"

Again, except Jackie's teeth closed before Shauna's could. A sting in Shauna's lip, a swelling in her heart, a pulsing between her legs.

"—as it gets."

Jackie was panting, determined to get the words out. She kept herself just out of Shauna's reach. Shauna wondered if she was losing time, if what she thought had been the briefest of interruptions had really been long seconds, maybe even minutes, because Jackie's lips were red and swollen, her hair mussed, her breathing ragged, and Shauna's heart was pounding, her sweatshirt unzipped and pushed open, her thighs slick and warm. If it had been longer, if time was getting away from her, then whatever Jackie had been saying, refracted but insistent, had to really *matter.*

It came back to Shauna.

"A wedding?" she asked.

Shauna thought of Taissa and Van, the image of them kissing under rope-bound twigs and scraps of torn fabric burned into her brain. She tried to remember if Mari and Akilah were together by then, but no—they couldn't have been. Doomcoming had been early. Jackie had been by Shauna's side. (Until she hadn't. Shauna shook her head roughly, pushing the flashes of someone else's hands on Jackie away, returning to the more comfortable memory of Jackie standing feet from her, pouting her lower lip, smiling, laughing, clapping.) And Taissa and Van kissing wasn't novel to Shauna—it was boring, rote, nauseating even, when all she could do was watch and want for Jackie—but that kiss *was,* because it was the first.

The first breaking of those rules, the first *fuck you* to the world they'd come from, the first silver lining Shauna could see in the world they'd landed in.

"Yeah." Jackie was crying.

Tears made tracks down her cheeks that Shauna wanted to erase with her fingers, but she couldn't let go of Jackie, couldn't risk her rolling away, floating away, running away. Shauna wrapped her arms tighter around Jackie's waist, holding her flush on top of her body. Jackie's elbows were planted on either side of Shauna's head, bracketing her, and she held Shauna's face in her hands. Shauna felt like prey—struck, pinned in place, vulnerable to a twist of her head that could snap her neck, to the pressure of a forearm bearing weight across her throat—and she thought that it might have been the best she'd ever felt. The safest. The most loved.

“We could’ve gotten married,” Jackie mumbled softly. “Not that night, because clearly we had a ways to go but just… we could’ve eventually, if—if things were different. Shauna, I really would’ve liked to marry you under shitty pine cone decorations.”

“I would’ve done it that night,” Shauna answered, in an immediate rush of breath. “If you’d asked me. Even then, I would’ve said yes.”

“Yeah?” Jackie grinned. She brushed Shauna’s hair away from her eyes, and every touch felt electric, sending light through Shauna’s entire body. “Well, you were pretty high.”

“I’m not kidding.” Shauna felt as though a spell had been broken. She could move freely, could run her hands over Jackie’s skin without fear of losing her. She did just that—cradling Jackie’s cheek, brushing a thumb across her earlobe, sliding her fingers underneath her sweater. “Dead sober.”

“I believe you,” Jackie giggled. She closed the space between them, letting the last of her laughter pour into Shauna’s mouth.

“Are these stars pretty?” Shauna asked, when Jackie pulled away. She glanced up at constellations that she knew she couldn’t name, if only because she couldn’t trust that the patterns she was seeing were truly there. “I think they’re even prettier than they were out there.”

“Mmm, let me look.”

Shauna finally allowed Jackie to wriggle off of her, to lay on solid ground and tuck herself into Shauna’s side.

“They are.” Jackie nodded once, definitive, against Shauna’s chest.

“I see plenty of pine cones,” Shauna said, “don’t you?”

Shauna craned her neck just in time to catch a flash in Jackie’s eye—a glimmer that said Jackie was catching on, but scared to believe.

“Oh, *countless,*” Jackie said, her tone carefully maintained. “They look very intentionally placed. Good spacing.”

“Jackie?” Shauna wrapped her arms around Jackie, swayed her side to side as much as she could without sitting them up.

“Shauna?”

“This is as close as we’ll ever get to out there.” Shauna dug her head back further, let the dirt and moss press against her skull. “And you’re right. It feels like we were *meant to* out there.”

Jackie pushed herself up onto her elbow, her gaze flicking across Shauna’s face, looking for evidence of misunderstanding. “Meant to have a wedding, right?”

Shauna’s tongue felt molasses-thick, sweet and heavy. She nodded.

Jackie grinned. Light danced around her, swelling and stretching and encompassing everything, until all Shauna could see was *her,* bathed in a brilliant glow that masked the rest

of their surroundings from view entirely. Shauna watched her lips move as she spoke. “Are you asking me to marry you?”

“Is that so dumb?” Shauna felt a pinch in her cheeks, as she mirrored Jackie’s smile.

“No,” Jackie said. “It’s perfect.”

“Marriage?” Nat stumbled backwards, struck by the force of the word.

Taissa swung an arm out, catching Nat around the hips. She gave her a shove to re-center her weight, before snaking her arms back around Van’s shoulders.

“Oh, I *love* weddings!” Lottie clapped her hands to the rhythm of music that was no longer playing and spun in a circle so quick her shawl billowed behind her, seemingly unbound by gravity. “Who’s going to officiate?”

They’d materialized suddenly after Jackie had pulled Shauna to her feet, all five of them much closer to the fire than Jackie had thought they’d been, or maybe Jackie had just then allowed herself to notice them. She’d been focused, earlier. Keyed into Shauna even more than usual. Braver with Shauna, more connected to Shauna, and what was more connected than everything they already were? How was it possible to feel even closer to her, when Jackie already viewed her as an extension of her own body?

But… there had been fissures before, hadn’t there? Painful cracks—ones they’d tried to align just right, tried to insulate from the pressure of merging the rest of themselves. Secrets and lies, lovers and distractions, motherhood and growing pains, and everything else their adult lives had boiled down to in each other’s absence.

And those fissures felt full now. Jackie had watched it happening in her mind’s eye—something much more viscous than the tea they’d taken, silver and shining, molten and beautiful, pouring over them, filling in every hollow until it swelled out over the top. All their surfaces repleted, level and polished. Texture remained, webbed lines of a different grain, but it no longer hurt to bump into those spots. They could trace them, push on them, note the feel of them beneath their fingertips, without fear of the fractures deepening.

It might even be healing for you. Jackie heard Lottie’s voice, but Lottie’s lips were occupied, trailing focused kisses down Nat’s forearm and onto her palm.

“Well, I’m ordained by the Universal Church of Life,” Misty announced firmly, “and we should *really* keep things official.”

Shauna laughed into Jackie’s hair, and Jackie was gripped by the need to *look at her.* Every time they’d named that need played in front of her, the trees a backdrop for the projected scenes, overlapping and merging together—holding hands in Jackie’s car as they left Wiskayok in the rearview, Shauna wide-eyed, in motel rooms and hotel rooms and guest rooms, the words spoken in seriousness and earnestness and playfulness, after fights and during sex and before bed.

I just want to look at you.

“I’m right here,” Shauna said softly.

The other Shaunas flickered and faded as Jackie realized she'd spoken aloud. Jackie could hear the others carrying on, but their voices were distant, as though filtered through the old walkie talkies that she and Shauna had used during long summers spent playing outside from dawn to dusk.

"None of this is official, Misty," Taissa argued. "Shauna's literally already married."

Shauna was *young.* She was her eighteen year old self, her face soft and bare and kind. The way she was staring back at Jackie, her full lips slightly parted, her eyes wide with quiet wonder, made Jackie think that she might be her younger self, too.

"This is more official than that ever was," Lottie said, still static, still background noise. "It always has been."

Shauna smiled. Closed mouth, shy and girlish, a smile that Jackie had missed longer than she'd known.

Jackie felt something near her left ear, the brush of her hair, the presence of new weight.

"There," Van said. "Now you both have flowers."

Jackie blinked, and when she opened her eyes she could see more than just Shauna.

It was no longer midnight. The darkness has turned back for them, allowed dusk to flood in. Van was stepping back into place, twenty-five years younger, dressed in slacks and a vest over a button-up, simple but clean. She stood closest to Jackie in the half circle that the others had formed around them.

Natalie was next, her dress verging on tacky, an animal print that Jackie almost certainly would've chastised her for in another life, her skin impossibly soft, unweathered by age or pain. Beside her was Misty, her hands clasped together in front of her chest as if physically stoppering her excitement, her curls fuller and wilder against her cheeks. Taissa, closest to Shauna, wore her hair shorter where Misty's was longer. Her eyes were shining and bright, bearing no trace of the fear or resistance that Jackie had grown accustomed to finding there.

"We were brought here tonight for a reason," Lottie's voice was no longer distant. She was solid, projecting even, and Jackie turned toward the sound. She stood behind Jackie and Shauna, wearing a white dress with a hemline just high enough on her frame to make it clear that it had once belonged to a girl much shorter. A flower crown perched on her head, where antlers had once sat. "An opportunity to right a wrong. To seal a love that has always been there, as old as the trees that shade us, the earth that provides for us."

Shauna smirked, and the motion of it was magnetic. Jackie lost track of Lottie's speech—something new age and spiritual that sort of made Jackie wish Misty had won the officiant spot—and narrowed in on Shauna once more. Their arms were outstretched, their hands clasped between them.

The others all bore some variation of their doomcoming attire, seemingly lent back out to them by the wilderness in a murky, almost-correct form, but not Shauna.

Shauna wore white.

Not so much a dress, as the color itself. Jackie could see every curve of her body beneath it. It draped and billowed and moved with every inhale and exhale, with each tensing of

muscle, with her words, once she spoke.

The vows came as if rehearsed. Jackie swore she knew what Shauna was going to say before she said it, felt a sense of déjà vu, believed that somehow this wasn't the first time they'd done this. Believed in a quickie marriage at Boston City Hall, a huge ceremony at a progressive synagogue, an intimate gathering on the coast of Maine, in every version of their lives culminating in one thing.

They must've been here before, because Shauna said everything that Jackie needed to hear in just one sentence, as if they'd sat down and written it together.

"I promise to love you forever, and trust in you always."

Jackie squeezed Shauna's hands tighter, felt them shake, couldn't tell which of them the trembling was stemming from.

"I promise to love you forever," Jackie said, "and stay by you always."

Jackie realized, as Lottie announced them wed and urged them to kiss, as raucous cheers and whoops broke out, that she had never seen Shauna look wholly at peace until the moment her vow left her lips.

And—with a lightness she didn't know she was still capable of, with all the love in the world pouring through her, with tears in her eyes and a shocking amount of sudden reverence for the spiritualist romantic shit that Lottie had spouted—Jackie kissed the bride.

"Shauuuu-naaaa," Jackie sang out, tipping her head back and leaning her body weight with it. She clutched Shauna's elbows, grinning into the sway of it. "My *wife."*

Jackie giggled. Shauna pulled Jackie upright, little faith in her own ability to catch her at this angle if she tipped backwards. Jackie snapped closer, as though standing up straight had been her idea, and took Shauna's cheeks between her hands. She squeezed so hard it almost hurt. "I'm so lucky. I'm the luckiest woman in the world."

Tai and Van stumbled off together, branches creaking in their wake and laughter filling the air behind them.

"I am," Shauna said, certain that she meant her words, but half-forgetting what they were in response to.

"I never thought I'd be anybody's wife." Jackie blew a stray hair out of her face, her lower lip jutting out adorably. Shauna caught it between her own. 'Only yours,' Jackie mumbled against her. "I only ever wanted to be yours, but there was never ever a time I thought I could be."

"Mmm," Shauna laughed, trailing kisses up and down Jackie's face, from temple to cheek to jaw to neck and back again. 'Mine. You're mine. I'll do so good.' Shauna's emotions shifted quicker than she could keep up with, laughter swinging into silent tears of worry. "I'll be better for you. I promise I will. I'll be so good to you, I'll be better, I'll make sure I—"

“Shauna, Shauna, Shauna,” Jackie forced their lips together just long enough to silence Shauna completely, “no. I want you. I love you. You’re good to me. You *are.* You’re my Shauna. You’re everything. I want *you.”*

Storm waves mellowed as quickly as they’d crashed in, Shauna melting into Jackie, bringing them back to the ground, almost exactly where they’d begun the night. Except this time, Shauna had Jackie laid out beneath her. There was a blanket there that Shauna didn’t remember laying out, navy blue, the perfect length to insulate Jackie from the ground completely.

“Shauna,” Jackie muttered, gripping the front of Shauna’s shirt in tight fists, “you’re so beautiful. You’ve always been so fucking beautiful.”

“You’re perfect,” Shauna whispered back. She claimed Jackie’s neck, nipping and sucking down her throat. “My perfect girl.”

Jackie’s chin hit the top of Shauna’s head as she nodded. *“Yours.”*

Shauna had to look at Jackie then, to see her face, to watch her eyes shift darker like she knew they would from the tone with which she’d spoken—intense, focused, driven.

Jackie’s pupils were blown huge. Shauna felt heavy and weightless all at once. Where once Shauna had felt jealousy and rage and fear alongside the heat in her abdomen, only heat remained. Heat and love and want. They crashed together, Jackie forcing Shauna down onto the blanket beside her.

The way they were just then, Shauna thought, felt so right, so good, because it was how they were *meant* to be. Jackie nuzzled Shauna’s neck, Shauna slid Jackie’s jeans down just enough, enough for her fingers to seek heat that had been familiar to her even before she’d ever gotten to touch, to move in the way her body was *meant* to be moving. Jackie was doing the same, crossed arms and tangled bodies, hips pushed open, and closeness, so so close that Shauna could hardly tell where Jackie ended and she began. Shauna let out her own shuddering breath at the same time as Jackie.

It was adolescent in some ways, like getting off quick while the house was empty or before the car parked off the main road drew attention. It was reciprocal in perfect time. But it was slower, more languid. There was no urgency between them, not even the urgency that would be warranted. All awareness of the dangers of the night, of what tomorrow held, all this urgent need that Shauna had felt to get Jackie out, to keep Jackie safe, to take her and *run run run,* was as good as the dew on the leaves around them. It evaporated away with every stroke of Jackie’s fingers, with every press of her lips, every jolting breath and whisper of Shauna’s name, every contraction of muscle, abs drawing her closer to Shauna, forehead creasing just enough for Shauna to catch it under lantern and star light, walls clenching down on Shauna’s fingers.

Peaks washed over them, and Shauna lost count of beginnings and ends, couldn’t thread together what was continuation and what was starting again. She was all pleasure. All shaking, tensing, moaning under Jackie’s fingers. All coaxing Jackie to her own summits over and over and over. All satisfaction, until she was overcome with the need to taste.

“Will it be too cold?” Shauna gasped, jolting when Jackie crooked her fingers just so.

Jackie groaned into her neck. “Will what be?”

“I need you. I need to have you.” Shauna gripped Jackie’s wrist to still her motions. Jackie whimpered. “But I can’t let you get too cold. Could take you inside,” Shauna muttered under her breath.

But inside felt miles away, a delay of minutes sounded as drastic as one of years. Shauna needed Jackie more than she’d ever needed anything else, was hungry for her in a way that startled her, in a way that reminded her of true starvation, of ravenous, bottomless desire for more.

“It’s okay,” Jackie panted. “It isn’t bad tonight.”

Shauna slid her hand out of warmth. She sat up, tugging Jackie’s jeans the rest of the way off. “You’ll tell me if you get cold?”

“I’ll tell you,” Jackie promised.

Shauna settled between Jackie’s legs. She slid her cheek against the inside of Jackie’s thigh and Jackie’s hips jerked, so slight it was almost imperceptible.

Lottie’s voice reached them from some distance, *“Misty, come here!”*

Natalie’s laugh followed from the same stretch, raspy and blissful and deep.

Light shifted around Shauna, the flicker of the flames and the beams of the lanterns bending and refracting and dancing around them. Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew it was the drugs, but *God*, it felt like magic. Like one of the movies they’d watched as kids—inanimate objects suddenly animate, the world around the characters so emotional and engaged that it bent the laws of physics.

“Do you know how much I thought about this, even then?” Shauna left open mouthed kisses against Jackie’s skin, trailing up, up, up. Jackie hummed so airily it was almost a song. ‘Exactly this.’ Shauna pressed three kisses to the hair between Jackie’s legs. Jackie’s hums shifted closer to moans. Shauna nuzzled with her nose, brushed with light fingers, took her time settling in. Then she giggled, “My mouth would water.”

Jackie’s laughter rang out and filled the air around them. More light shifted, like the sound waves themselves were bending it. “I was the same,” Jackie confessed through giggles.

Jackie threaded her fingers through Shauna’s hair, bracing them firmly against her scalp. Shauna inhaled deep. Opened her mouth. Ate.

There were so many noises around them. Wind forcing tired creaks from old branches, the scurrying of small animals through the brush, the hoot of an owl on the hunt. And, louder than all the rest, the sounds of women crying out. From the cabin where Taissa and Van had retreated, from the patch of the woods that they’d heard Nat and Lottie beckon Misty to earlier, and, more important than any other, the only noise of the night that mattered to Shauna, from Jackie—her head pitched back, her chin to the sky, her cries wild and free.

By the time Shauna was done with her, Jackie thought her high might be wearing off. She was still trembling, the sort of internal muscle twitches that would probably still be there when she tried to walk in the morning, but she'd gathered enough strength to lift her head off of the ground.

"Shauna?"

Shauna was there, of course. She'd barely moved from her station between Jackie's legs, her head just inches to the left, her cheek pressed to Jackie's thigh. Asleep. She'd fallen asleep while Jackie recovered, her arms still cradling Jackie's thighs from beneath them, Jackie's flesh her pillow.

"Shauna," Jackie repeated. She felt a breeze. It cooled the wet between her legs, everything that Shauna hadn't been able to take in as quick as it had come. "We can't stay like this. We need to go inside."

Shauna grumbled in her sleep, nuzzling into Jackie's thigh. Jackie cupped Shauna's cheek, smoothing her thumb back and forth until Shauna woke.

Shauna's eyes snapped open. "Fuck." She pushed herself up onto her elbows. "Are you okay? Are you cold?"

"I'm not cold," Jackie soothed immediately. The tension eased out of Shauna, her face relaxing and her shoulders dropping. She nodded softly, the haze of being awoken from deep sleep edging back in. "I just don't want to sleep outside with no pants on and your head between my legs."

"No?" Shauna smirked. "I thought it was a great idea."

Shauna dressed Jackie as carefully as she'd undressed her, gentle and purposeful and so sweet it brought Jackie to the verge of tears. She swallowed them down, watching as Shauna righted her own clothes quickly.

Shauna gave Jackie her hands, and Jackie rolled upright. Before she could shift to stand, though, Shauna pulled her even closer. Jackie landed in Shauna's lap, straddling Shauna's waist, sitting atop her thighs, as Shauna sat up on her knees. Shauna was supporting her weight, with arms wrapped tight around her.

Jackie didn't fight it. She couldn't bring herself to. She leaned in, burying her face in Shauna's neck, squeezing tight to her with every limb.

Though she couldn't find it in herself to resist it physically, Jackie worried aloud, "Your shoulder," she argued weakly.

"Doesn't hurt anymore," Shauna mumbled into her hair. "Not even a little."

Shauna carried Jackie inside, not with Jackie in a bridal hold or crossing the threshold to a honeymoon suite, but with Jackie clinging to her, her legs wrapped around Shauna's waist and her arms around Shauna's neck, back into the cabin with the others—exactly where they belonged.

They laid in front of the fire, atop cushions and blankets that someone had scattered on the hardwood floor before Shauna and Jackie had come inside. Shauna linked her fingers through Jackie's, pulling Jackie's arm tighter around her. Taissa was close enough to Shauna that she could feel the tickle of her hair against her forehead when she shifted. Shauna could tell it was Lottie laying just above her head from the cadence of her breaths.

It was Nat who spoke into the quiet, "This is the first time I've felt like we were actually meant to survive."

Their response was silent, but not lacking. It was a shifting of bodies, all of them moving closer to her, to each other, and settling deeper into the makeshift bed that they shared between them, until one by one they let themselves drift into sleep.

And in that night, another night of falling asleep in a pile with the girls she loved despite herself, knowing that they might not survive the next day, with the quiet of the woods and the energy of everything they'd ever been, of everyone they'd ever loved and everyone they'd ever wronged pressing in on them, Shauna felt a sense of belonging that she hadn't since they'd boarded the plane out of the woods.

34. never meet your heroes

December 31st, 2021

3:03 am

“Somebody give me one good reason we should even help them.” Mari crossed her arms against her chest. Her nose twitched in distaste. She settled her weight into her right hip and slid her left foot forward, aiming to prod Van’s sleeping form.

Akilah snatched her arm and gripped tight. “Wait,” she whispered, as though their voices may actually wake the women. “We need a plan first.”

Mari frowned, but conceded, linking her arm through Akilah’s when Akilah’s eyes grew wider with worry.

“Fine,” Mari said. “Laura Lee? This is the sort of shit you love, any ideas?”

Laura Lee swallowed hard, prying her eyes away from Lottie: her long lashes, the hastily bandaged cut on her palm, and her lips, twitching occasionally, as though she may open her mouth and call out to Laura Lee in her sleep.

Laura Lee had missed her chance, the last time this had happened. They’d had less freedom then. They’d been under threat of the encroaching dark and tethered against free will in a way that they didn’t seem to be this time but, even then, Laura Lee had fought hard enough to hold Lottie. She should’ve traded the time she’d spent whispering empty, sweet words into Lottie’s ear for time spent giving her actual, tangible direction. Lottie had always needed direction.

She’d needed Laura Lee.

“We should make them young for this. They’ll realize it isn’t just a normal dream quicker that way,” Laura Lee said. “I feel like we can control it this time, don’t you?”

“I can try,” Gen offered.

Melissa tugged her cap down nervously as she followed in Gen’s footsteps, trailing her as though pulled by a divine thread, though Laura Lee knew there was no divinity needed there, only habit strong as anything else.

Gen knelt beside Jackie, who lay wrapped in Shauna’s arms, and touched her middle and ring fingers to Jackie’s temple. Time shifted, but the movement remained blessedly contained to one spot. Laura Lee felt the ripple of it, saw the wood beneath Jackie’s body warp ever so slightly. The wave settled, and Jackie was nineteen again.

She blinked her eyes open. Yawned. Snuggled closer to Shauna. Then, as though she’d finally snapped into consciousness, Jackie looked up, saw Gen hovering beside her head, and froze.

“What the fuck?” Jackie gasped, her eyes wide and her mouth fixed open.

“So much for a plan,” Akilah muttered under her breath.

“Uhh, okay,” Melissa stumbled backward with Gen in tow, “it works, but it wakes them up!”

“No shit, genius,” Mari snapped. “We can see that, thanks.”

“What the fuck, what the fuck, what the—” Jackie repeated, her eyes squeezed shut and her hands roaming Shauna’s body to try and wake her.

“Gen,” Laura Lee said calmly, “wake Shauna.”

“Yeah, cause she’ll *totally* make things calmer.” Gen rolled her eyes, but she knelt again. Melissa held the back of her jacket like a leash.

“Jackie,” Laura Lee soothed. “It’s okay. It’s a dream.”

“I mean, is it really?” Mari scoffed. “It’s not like we even know what—”

“You do Van,” Akilah interrupted, pulling gently on Mari’s arm. “I want to wake Tai up.”

Mari quieted, nodded, knelt alongside Akilah.

“Oh, can I do Misty?” Crystal chimed hopefully.

“Sure,” Laura Lee answered absently.

One by one they knelt, and one by one the others shifted back in age and woke with a start. They all reacted in their own form of shock, gasps and curses and a foot swinging out, which Laura Lee caught sight of in her periphery, but none of it mattered to her. Because the girl she woke did so as though she had been expecting this meeting all along.

Lottie stretched, cat-like, and grinned. She rose to her knees and sat on her heels and turned her face up toward Laura Lee’s, waiting for instruction.

The cacophony continued, until Laura Lee raised both palms to the room to quiet them.

“We need to discuss a few things,” she announced, “if you all want to make it out of this alive.”

9:14 am

“Oh my God, my fucking back.”

Jackie heard Taissa’s groan, but she kept her eyes resolutely shut. She was far too cold to move from beneath her pile of blankets, and she had that feeling she sometimes got, as though her mind had been racing the entire time she’d been asleep, allowing for no genuine rest.

“Roll onto your side before you get up,” Lottie said, from somewhere above Jackie’s head. “It’ll hurt less.”

“Misty, get the fuck off of me,” Van snapped, off to Jackie’s left.

As everyone else rose, Jackie tried to keep her breaths even, her eyes shut loosely rather than squeezed tight. She just needed a few more minutes of—

"Hey," Nat said, far too close to Jackie for the words not to be aimed at her. Something, probably Nat's foot, nudged Jackie's hip gently and Jackie groaned. "Up and at 'em."

Jackie huffed. When she opened her eyes she saw Nat standing above her, a sympathetic half-smile on her face. Jackie felt some tension that she hadn't known was there ease out of her shoulders, realized suddenly that she'd been worried she might open her eyes to something else entirely. She rubbed her eyes with closed fists and blinked harder.

Odd. Jackie felt odd, but that was likely just because there was no beautiful, grumpy, exhausted brunette in her arms.

Jackie whipped her head around, but there was no need for the urgency. Shauna was mere feet from her, doling instant coffee into cheap Ikea mugs. Jackie exhaled, rose to her knees and shuffled forward until Shauna had to pause in her stirring to loop an arm around her waist. Jackie nuzzled into her wordlessly. She had been telling herself that it was Shauna whose attachment issues were, understandably, worrisome. But Jackie had to admit to herself, with her hands buried in the fabric of Shauna's sweatshirt and her nose buried in the crook of her neck, that she may have underestimated her own.

"Good morning," Shauna muttered into Jackie's hair. She pressed kisses there until Jackie felt assured enough to release her. Shauna gave the coffee three more stirs, then passed it to Jackie.

"Good morning." Jackie smiled, set the mug aside in favor of brushing Shauna's hair out of her eyes.

"Was last night—" Shauna bit into her lower lip. Jackie pressed her thumb to Shauna's chin, tugged down on her skin until she was forced to free it. "I—um, was last night… real?"

Shauna's eyes were wide, fear and hope battling in them, neither winning outright. Jackie knew instantly what Shauna wanted confirmation of. She took Shauna's left hand in both of her own, drew it to her mouth, and kissed the ring on Shauna's finger.

Shauna exhaled with a grin.

"Yeah," Jackie said, her throat raw, the word catching, "we really did that."

"Gonna be one hell of a honeymoon," Van sighed.

"Mazel tov." Tai raised a mug in cheers. She drank, her face twisting with the bitterness. "Fuck, you'd think they'd spring for something a little less awful."

"Very inconsistent on the ideology," Misty chided, as though they were in the room to hear her annoyance. 'It's like they want to suffer, but not too much. We didn't have any coffee at *all*, but they think this is good enough?' Misty gave a humorless little laugh and shook her head quickly. "I mean, seriously?"

"I don't think they know what suffering really is." Nat flopped down into the chair, her shoulders slumped forward and her legs kicked straight, her heels digging into the wood floor. "Speaking of suffering, what's the plan for today?"

“We’ve got to get Willow on her own,” Shauna was quick to answer. “If we don’t pull her aside first, the whole thing falls apart.”

Shauna sat down, her back to the fire, and patted the spot next to her. Jackie joined her, settling into her side, and let herself imagine post-nuptials that *didn’t* involve plotting a mass murder. Shauna’s body laid bare on crisp white sheets, rather than obscured by clothes stained red with blood. Shauna’s hair mussed from Jackie’s fingers alone, rather than nights spent sleeping in dirt and on unforgiving floors. Shauna’s cheeks flushed from Jackie’s unwillingness to abandon her station between her thighs, rather than the shock of wood stove heat after coming in from the cold.

Waking dreams that would soon be their reality, if Jackie Taylor had anything to say about it.

“So, we get her alone, and then what?” Tai asked. ‘Feed her the same lines about the wilderness sending us to… *correct their path,’* Tai waved her hands airily, an impression of Lottie that might’ve landed, had she not immediately crossed her legs and rolled her eyes, “or whatever the fuck it is we’re going with?”

“We can’t trick her,” Lottie sighed, wrapping her shawl tighter around her shoulders. She clutched her mug between both hands and pitched forward slightly. Jackie thought she looked like one of those women at the end of a horror movie, as though she ought to be nestled in an aluminum blanket on the back of an ambulance. “Even if what we were saying *was* true, I don’t think she’d care. She’s got a vision. She’s not going to let us alter it.”

“She’s just doing whatever the fuck it is that she wants to do,” Nat agreed. “We’re nothing but the excuse.”

“So we threaten her.” Van shrugged. Jackie could feel the frustration behind it. Van was over-tired and over-wrought, done with the planning phase, ready for the action. Ready to be *done*, no matter the cost. “We get her into the cabin, keep the followers out, and tell her she’s got to go along with it. Then we what? Keep her on a tight leash?”

“I don’t know if we even have a leash that tight,” Tai said.

“It’s seven against one.” Misty set her mug down on the floor with a thunk that made Jackie worry it may spill over the rim.

Habit, of course—engrained from years spent keeping the few things Jackie did own in good condition—because it didn’t fucking matter what got stained in this life-sized replica hellhole. Shauna frowned at Jackie, which meant that Jackie was wearing her thoughts on her face. She forced on a smile for Shauna. God, Jackie was over-tired herself. A little strung out, probably, from their ill-advised trip the night before. A little irrational. A little entrenched in something surreal.

She needed to drink her shitty coffee. She brought it to her lips, tried to focus on Misty’s words.

“We keep a few people on her,” Misty said, “and a few on the crowd. And Lottie distracts them with a speech on the new ritual.”

“And someone watches Lottie,” Shauna muttered under her breath.

Jackie squeezed her thigh, in placation and in warning.

"I don't need a babysitter, *Shauna,"* Lottie whined, drawing Shauna's name out like she might've when they were sixteen and drunk, arguing over something wholly inconsequential. "Did last night mean nothing to you?"

Shauna bristled, pulled Jackie closer. "Last night meant everything to me."

"I don't just mean Jackie," Lottie clarified. "Though, that was part of it. For all of us, it was."

Tai chuckled softly. "I don't know about it being for—"

"No, not *for* all of us. Just… that was *important* for all of us." Lottie huffed. "It was one important moment among many last night, all of them meant to bring us even closer together. Don't you see?"

Nat stretched sideways to rest a hand on Lottie's shoulder. "It was good, Lot," she said gently. "It was a… a really good night."

Misty made a noise somewhere between clearing her throat and coughing. She blushed when Jackie caught her eye, chewing on her lip and letting her gaze fall to her mug.

"No," Lottie shook her head. "I mean, *yes*. That, too. But… last night was *it*. That *sealed* it. All our differences, all our anger, all our mistrust. None of it matters as much as us being together. Working together. If we don't trust one another—and I mean *truly* trust one another—we're going to die tonight."

"Lottie," Tai sighed.

"This isn't *prophecy,"* Lottie insisted. "This is logic. Reality. All of the things you guys *say* you care about most. We're facing an entire community. They outnumber us by at least five times. If we don't trust each other, if there are fissions or… or fractures among us? We're done before we've even started."

"She's right," Nat said. "Anybody who doesn't trust everyone in this room—at least trust everyone in this room enough to carry this shit out—may as well try their luck hiking out now."

Jackie, for better or for worse, genuinely did trust them. Not unconditionally, not without limits or outside of the confines of this place and these tasks, but the rest didn't matter. She and Shauna could decide how they felt about the rest of it later. All that mattered was getting through this day, clawing their way to another morning where they would wake tangled up in each other.

And Jackie knew that Lottie and Nat were right: they all needed each other. For good, really, Jackie thought. But for now, Jackie knew.

"I trust you," Jackie answered. She felt Shauna tense against her. "All of you. The only way out of this mess is through it, and the only way through it is together."

"I'm pretty sure you gave almost this *exact* speech during that game against Lincoln," Tai snorted. "After Shauna got a yellow card and you busted your ankle."

“Her ankle got busted first,” Shauna corrected. “That’s why I got the yellow card.”

“My ankle was *not* busted. I played the rest of the game,” Jackie said. “And we won, didn’t we?”

“Just because you played doesn’t mean your ankle wasn’t busted.” Van rolled her eyes. “You spent the entire bus ride home trying not to cry.”

“Oh, God, that’s right,” Tai laughed, “and Shauna carried you to her car on piggy back when we got back to the school.”

“Gay as fuck, right in front of our eyes.” Van shook her head in mock solemnity.

Jackie leaned close to Shauna, seizing the opportunity to whisper into her ear under the cover of the banter: *“Just say you trust them, even if you don’t.”*

Shauna drew Jackie away with a hand on her cheek and made purposeful eye contact. Her thumb traced circles against Jackie’s skin, and she told Jackie everything that she needed to know. Shauna, against all odds, had faith in this. In them. In all of them.

“And they *still* are,” Nat clicked her tongue against her teeth.

Jackie kissed Shauna—communicated something heavy to her, gratitude and love and relief—while giving the others a show, a joke, a distraction.

“Enough, you two,” Tai groaned. “We’ve got shit to do today. You can get back to it when we’re done.”

Shauna scrunched her nose at Tai, and Tai’s eyes lit up in a way that told Jackie her annoyance was mostly feigned.

Tai held Van’s sleeve in her fingers, playing with the fabric. “I trust you all,” she announced. Genuine, albeit a little removed, as though this were simply business, as though she were finalizing a deal. “Is everybody else in?”

“Yeah.” Van nodded. “I trust everyone.”

“Me too,” Misty said.

That left only Shauna, who didn’t allow for suspense to build.

“I trust you guys,” she said softly. “Let’s get this over with.”

9:51 am

“I thought they had poison ready anyway?” Tai leaned over Misty’s shoulder, peering into the pot in front of her.

“You are welcome to search their many storage sheds for something that looks poisonous, hope that you’ve chosen correctly, and hope that they did adequate research on the creation of lethal poisons. *I*, however, would rather make something that I *know* is going to work.”

“Yeah, okay,” Tai said, stepping back to a distance where she could pretend that she was no longer supervising Misty’s work over her shoulder.

Misty ignored her, focused on the task at hand. She could almost see Mari crouched beside her, stained and torn yellow sweatshirt, pretty eyes, deadly glare. Not literally, of course. Only people like Shauna and Lottie *literally* saw things that weren't there, because Lottie and Shauna had severe, unmedicated schizoaffective disorders (mixed, in Lottie's case, with a potential dash of psychic ability).

No, Misty could "see" Mari in her mind's eye, like a normal person, and she could hear Mari's voice ringing in her ears. Not the way it occasionally did during nightmares, but in a way that made Misty wonder whether the words were dredged up from memory or from dream.

"Don't overcook it," Mari instructed. *"Take it off the heat early and let it steep."*

It was the damndest thing, really, how recent the memory felt. Misty's memories from out there were hazy sometimes, but she didn't think that they'd ever poisoned someone with hemlock before, or with anything for that matter. They'd been much keener on sharp objects.

But Misty remembered Akilah talking about the hemlock, too: *"The roots and seeds are way more poisonous than the leaves."*

Or… or maybe Misty just remembered reading about hemlock somewhere. That must've been it. The words of a redditor in her citizen detectives' group, coming to her in Mari and Akilah's voices because she'd had to think more about the two of them in a span of a few days than she had in as many years.

Misty pulled her gloves on higher and sank her knife into the root, slicing it as close to paper thin as she could manage without her trusty mandoline.

"They look like carrots," Nat said, joining Taissa to watch.

Misty felt Nat's gaze on her. She rolled her shoulders back, straightened her posture out.

"They are carrots," Tai answered, before Misty could. Tai frowned, as though startled. "Wild hemlock is in the carrot family, but I… have no idea why I know that."

Something felt strange. There was no denying that. But Misty thought that it might be *good* strange. The sort of strange that would lend itself to impending success, to beating odds that seemed insurmountable.

Misty dropped the roots into the pot and stirred.

10:37 am

"Taissa!" Van had finally stopped her nervous pacing, but she halted with a near-stomp of her foot and a frantic, frustrated thrash of her hands. "You *can't* be backing out now."

"I'm not backing out," Tai corrected her. "Did I say I was backing out?"

The words came out overly-harsh, how they might've with Sammy or Simone on Tai's worse days. Van made *that* face—the slightest of frowns tugging at her lips, puppy dog disappointment—oh, fuck.

No, Taissa could *so* not be thinking about dogs right now. She took a breath, forced her hand off of its perch on the back of her hip, used it to reach out and grasp Van's forearm instead.

"I'm *not,"* Tai promised. Van's shoulders dropped in cautious relief. "I'm just… asking you if you're sure this is the right move."

Van sighed. "It's the only move."

Taissa let herself be pulled in, allowed Van to draw her into a kiss, got embarrassingly close to whimpering into Van's mouth when she slid her hands under her shirt and ran her nails up and down the bare skin of her back.

But voices filtered in from beyond the bedroom door, stark reminders that shattered the weak shroud of peace they'd managed to construct.

Jackie's first, gentle but insistent: "Oh, Lot, I don't think you should really be helping with the… um, the—"

Then, Shauna: "With the fucking poison. Sit down."

Lottie's voice didn't travel well—she must've been doing her lilting prophet bit again, getting some practice in at the final hour.

But Shauna's was quick to return: "I said *sit."*

Van rolled her eyes, breathed out the tiniest of laughs through her nose, and Tai regained the ability to tune the others out, just in time to miss Jackie's imminent *well, honey's* and *oh, sweetie's.*

"Did you sleep at all?" Van asked, running her thumb back and forth against the side of Tai's neck.

"Yeah, I did, actually," Tai answered. She pitched her weight forward, resting her forehead in the crook of Van's neck. Van leaned back against the desk and pulled Tai closer, urging her to relax against her. 'I slept heavy,' Tai mumbled, "I feel like I had… weird fucking dreams, but I don't remember them."

"Me too." Van nodded, massaging the base of Tai's skull.

Tai moaned lightly, thought for a brief moment about pulling a Shauna and fucking Van right on the desk.

"It was the shrooms," Van said. "We were still high when we went to sleep."

"Yeah," Tai trailed kisses up Van's neck, paused just beneath her ear, "must've been."

12:02 pm

Shauna was stalking Nat. Nat could feel her gaze on the back of her head, could hear her footfalls, near-silent in a way that most people wouldn't pick up on. Shauna was like that. She either stomped, with big baby cow eyes and a frown, a struck prey entrance that she wanted

everyone in the vicinity to witness, or she stalked, with an expression cold as steel and lips sealed tight against the tell of breath, hunting in secret.

Nat much preferred predator Shauna to prey. She didn't look over her shoulder. She just took another drag of her smoke, and let Shauna pounce.

"When I said we need eyes on Lottie earlier," Shauna whispered, harsh in Nat's ear, "I meant it."

Nat side-stepped, crossed her arms and leaned back against the front of the house. Shauna stood unnaturally still. Her breaths came quicker, no longer muted. There was a glimmer of panic in her eyes, but it wasn't the bullshit kind, wasn't the kind she'd pulled after she'd called them over to take care of her dead boyfriend problem. It was real.

Nat raised a brow. Still, Shauna didn't offer more. Nat dropped her cigarette, stubbed it out with the toe of her boot.

"I know you did."

Shauna nodded. "I meant… the other stuff I said, too." She softened, shrugging and shaking her head. "I do trust everyone not to *intentionally* fuck this up."

"I know what you mean," Nat said. She rubbed her thumb against the side of her pointer finger, felt some ash that lingered there grind into even finer powder. "I have her. I'll stick by her side. Be her little… acolyte. Her right hand. Van shouldn't do it. It's too… it's just not right."

"Yeah." Shauna inhaled deep, her chest rising with it. The animal quirks of her movements were lost entirely on exhale, and she shoved her hands in her pockets like the girl she'd once been. Her face was open and honest when she looked up, no hint of calf or of wolf. "I… I think you and Jackie are the… least likely to have a—a *moment* during all this. Where you… lose sight of what we're doing."

This was Shauna Shipman, being not only honest, but genuinely vulnerable. This shit never would've happened if Jackie hadn't come back from the great fucking beyond. Nat never would've bought it, at least, even if she'd thought she might be seeing it.

But, as much as she tried to pretend she wasn't, for all her slamming books down onto coffee tables to demand attention, and aiming guns with the safety off, and screaming and kicking and punching and fighting, Shauna had been the most undeniably changed of them all.

"Yeah, maybe." Nat eyed her carefully, mulling over her words. "You're worried."

"Of course I'm worried." Shauna scoffed, rolled her eyes. "How could I not be worried?"

"Not about the whole thing," Nat corrected. "About yourself."

Shauna's hand clenched into a shaky fist at her side, and she sputtered, "I—I—"

"I trust you." Nat grasped Shauna's wrist. The action could've been threatening, but Nat knew that Shauna would see it for the comfort it was meant to be, even if it didn't help all that much. "I trust *you* not to intentionally pull anything." Nat repeated Shauna's own words back to her, and saw the flash of recognition in her eyes.

There was a distant snap of a twig. It was Jackie, heading back to the cabin from where she'd been helping Misty, Van, and Tai—dragging more logs to the seating area, shifting it further from the cabin to discourage any curious cult freaks from casual eavesdropping attempts post their nabbing of the bitch leader.

"I have Lottie," Nat said, low in Shauna's ear. "So, tell me, who has you?"

"I have her!" Jackie called out.

She'd been yards away, much too far to hear them when Nat had whispered, so far that Nat thought she must've misheard what Jackie had yelled, until Shauna looked at her in wide-eyed shock. They gaped, waiting, their nervous ticks confirming for each other what each of them already knew to be true.

Jackie looked confused herself, when she finally made it to the foot of the steps and halted. She stared off into the middle distance between them, her lips slightly parted.

"Jax…"

Nat watched as words failed Shauna. Shauna licked her lips instead of saying anything more, and jogged down the steps, pausing at Jackie's side, as though Jackie needed an escort to mount them.

"Huh," Jackie said simply. She blinked a few times, then smiled weakly at each of them. "That was—"

"Fucking weird," Nat answered.

Shauna took Jackie's hand. "Did you… hear us from all the way over there?"

"No," Jackie took the steps slowly, like she was afraid they may give way beneath her. 'I just… I don't know. I just knew what you were talking about. But I—I have her, Nat.' Jackie laid a hand on Nat's shoulder and squeezed gently. "I do."

"Clearly," Nat said. "On some fucking telepathic mental radio level."

While Jackie fused over Shauna on the porch, in a way that allowed Shauna to think that she was the one doing the fussing, Nat headed inside, decided she ought to see just how difficult *having Lottie* was going to be.

Lottie was laying on the couch, curled up under shawls and blankets. She always managed to look tiny when she laid curled up on her side, though she was the tallest of all of them.

"Hey, princess." Nat knelt at her side, smoothed her bangs off of her forehead.

"Hi, Natalie," Lottie answered, her eyes still fixed shut.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine. Tired." Lottie opened her eyes, stared back at Nat with that piercing look that others had often described as Lot staring into their souls. "Nothing extraordinary."

"Yeah?" Nat kissed her forehead.

As Lottie hummed and Nat pulled away, she felt herself choke on memory, saw the briefest of flashes of Laura Lee boarding an old Cessna, of Travis hanging from a chain, and fought

guilt that hadn't managed to pierce through to the surface for weeks.

"Yeah." Lottie sat up, motioned for Nat to join her.

Nat let Lottie put an arm around her shoulders. Leaned in and closed her eyes, rested her head against Lottie's chest and went limp, against her better judgment. Lottie stroked her hair, and she felt herself drifting off somewhere.

"Lottie?"

Lottie kissed the crown of her head, and Nat heard her inhale deep, just once. "Hmm?"

"Do you know what you're going to say?" Nat asked. "Later, when the freaks get here?"

"We shouldn't call them freaks," Lottie tutted lightly, but there was no break in the motion of her fingers threading through Nat's hair, no true reprimand.

Nat sighed. "Okay, do you know what you're going to say to the fan club who wanted to murder Shauna's sixteen year old kid?"

"Yes," Lottie said. "I have the rough idea."

Nat made to sit up straight, but Lottie held her in place. "Rough—"

"Enough," Lottie said. "I have enough to work off of."

1:35 pm

"Everyone feels okay with the plan, right?" Tai asked. "Nobody feels a little… like they might do something impulsive when they see this bitch?" She looked first to Lottie, then to Shauna, then to the ground, as though caught out.

Earlier, when it had just been her and Nat, Shauna had felt tears prick at her eyes at the mention of this. She'd wanted to be mad at Nat, wanted to tell her to go fuck herself, but had only managed the tiniest of frowns without dissolving into a fit of tears. Because Nat hadn't been wrong.

Shauna was unstable. She was unpredictable, even to herself. Hadn't Jackie asked her, not once but twice in such a short span of time, whether Shauna thought that she may accidentally hurt her? And hadn't Shauna had to carefully consider the question before giving her an answer?

There was a mumbled affirmative answer to Tai's question by the group.

"I know Lottie has to be the one to speak. It's the only thing that might stop these… people from asking too many questions." Shauna swallowed a flash of old jealousy like a bitter pill, forced herself to return to thinking only of Jackie: keeping Jackie safe, keeping Jackie alive. 'But,' she pushed on, "I think… well, I think the rest of us need to stay as far away from our old roles as possible."

Shauna hadn't known that she thought that until she'd said it. The words didn't even feel like her own. For some reason, they felt parroted. She remembered them from somewhere,

could almost see Laura Lee saying them, but that didn't make sense. Laura Lee had been long dead by the time they'd had any roles to speak of.

"I think so, too," Van answered quickly.

Shauna nodded. She tucked Jackie into her side and tried to pretend like the shaking in her hands and the jumping in her gut was all nervous anticipation, rather than excitement.

2:01 pm

"There's got to be something else we can do." Tai paced the main room, her hand pressed against the back of her hip once again. "More to prepare. Or—or something. We shouldn't be wasting time—"

"We've done it all," Van said, for the third time that afternoon.

She caught Tai's arm on a pass and tugged. Tai sat reluctantly beside her, nervous energy in her feet, a forward bend to her spine, but at least she wasn't mobile. Van squeezed her thigh.

"Every chore they expect to *see* complete *is* complete," Misty said. "The ritual space is set up. The… *special tea* is ready. The cups are laid out."

Compostable cups, Van thought. Ones that they'd had to test to make sure they could withstand heat, in case the cult was picky about their beverage temperatures and wanted them to reheat the shit. Fucking hippie freaks.

"We've planned everything we can," Shauna said, giving Tai the sympathetic look that she reserved for Jackie and Taissa alone. "All we can do now is wait."

Jackie looked nervous, clung to Shauna the way she had when they were little girls. Lottie behaved as though this was any other day, the seven of them lounging around the manor in PJs, bickering about what to eat for dinner or what movie to put on. Nat was steady, focused, determined, and armed to the fucking gills. Misty was near-giddy with anticipation. And Taissa didn't really want to do this, that much was clear.

But Van couldn't deny that she felt a thrill in her own chest, growing stronger with each minute that passed as they approached 3:00 pm.

3:02 pm

"Dear God, they're punctual," Tai muttered.

Her hand kept straying beneath her sweater to the waist of her jeans, brushing against the handgun that Lottie knew she'd tucked there.

"It's," Misty glanced at her watch, "technically two minutes past, and they're not quite to the cabin yet, but not bad for a hike with this many people."

Lottie tuned out the bickering and frantic assessments from the other women, focused solely on the sounds of clambering of feet moving closer through the brush, and the advice that she knew had been given to her by Laura Lee, because it was Laura Lee's voice that ran through her head.

Lottie was to be nothing but herself. She was to offer herself to these misguided souls, and usher them into their fates. *It* wanted these people, and Lottie thought that, if they were lucky, this might be the final sacrifice that freed the rest of them from its grasp.

"It's time," Lottie said. "We all need to go out, they need to see that we're all committed. That we didn't lose any of our own to doubt."

"Jesus, fuck," Van breathed. Her voice was shaky, but Lottie knew that her resolve was intact. "Right, stay in a group then. Act natural and stay close."

"Oh, really?" Shauna said. "Glad you said something, I was planning on doing a fucking cartwheel right into the crowd of homicidal freaks, just to see how they'd react."

"Shauna," Jackie chided. A pause, then a few delayed chuckles, including Jackie's own. "I *seriously* doubt your cartwheeling abilities."

"We keep all *our* homicidal freaks on this side," Natalie said, "and all *their* homicidal freaks on the other."

She eyed her rifle where it lay, propped against the wall, hidden behind the coat rack, and Lottie knew that it was killing her not to step out that door with it raised and ready.

"Except Cara," Nat added, venom in her voice, creeping up from her lips to her eyes.

"I thought we agreed to refer to her as Willow," Misty frowned. "For clarity's sake."

Nat shrugged. "It was clear enough, if you knew what I meant."

"Guys, they're almost here," Jackie interrupted. "Now or never."

3:04 pm

Lottie was putting on the performance of a lifetime, and for the very first time Shauna found comfort in that, rather than a sinking sense of dread. Nat and Misty flanked her as she glided toward the dumbstruck crowd, while Shauna, Van, and Taissa hung back a few feet, Jackie secured between them.

"Welcome, everyone!" Lottie announced. She clasped her hands together in front of her chest and reached out toward them, as though to beckon them closer. "We're so happy that you could join us."

Shauna's heart thundered in her chest. She dug her fingers into Jackie's wrist. She couldn't look at Jackie, couldn't allow herself, because looking at Jackie would mean distraction that Shauna couldn't come back from. It would mean taking her and running, leaving the rest of the women behind to clean up the mess of their departure. It would mean never returning to Callie, not to mention further risking her life. Never being able to settle, never having a shot at making Jackie truly happy.

So, Shauna kept her eyes on what mattered most in that moment: the crowd. They ranged in age, from what looked like older teens to a woman who must've been in her fifties, and there were more women than men, but just barely. They gazed at Lottie, at all of them really, with unbridled awe.

They're all going to die, Shauna comforted herself. They were going to die writhing and foaming at the mouth, or they were going to die with a bullet ripping through their heart, and that knowledge allowed Shauna to stay calm, to not go off book.

Shauna recognized Willow instantly. Not from the grainy photo they'd seen, but from an air of self-importance and unbridled confidence that was rivaled only by Lottie's. She was approaching them slowly, but she gave no outward indicators of surprise. Her lips split into a wide grin, one that her idiot followers would buy as *knowing.* Her ego, so strong she couldn't set it aside even to ensure her own safety, was leading her straight into their hastily laid trap.

Lottie and Willow met in the middle, halting with just a few feet between them. The crowd buzzed with confusion, anticipation, but none of them seemed to be armed. Shauna scanned them, noticed Natalie doing the same. Definitely nothing bigger than a handgun, but somehow Shauna doubted that even those had made it into the crowd. Morgan had spoken of doing things *the right way,* of spears and knives and rudimentary traps.

Shauna thought about returning to the cabin. Dragging Nat with her, thrusting the rifle into her hands and forcing her into the attic to take them out from the tiny window like a fucking snipper, but she felt Jackie's eyes land on her for a moment and was reminded of why they had to do it this way in the first place.

This wasn't just revenge. This was strategy. Shauna had something to lose now, and she couldn't keep operating like she didn't. These freaks *hadn't* taken Jackie. Jackie was right there, heart beating and blood flowing and lungs filling with the same air as Shauna's, so this had to be done right. They had to ensure that they'd get away with it.

"Willow," Lottie chimed brightly. "My dear, would you mind? There are still a few loose ends to tie up, before we begin."

"Is that—"

"—oh my—"

"—really them!"

Lottie and Willow stood blinking at each other for a moment, neither acknowledging the crowd. The crowd themselves seemed blessedly afraid to come any closer. It appeared to be a near-even split on whether their stillness was due to worry that it may be dangerous to approach, or worry that it may be disrespectful, viewed as a slight.

"Everyone," Willow said eventually, her tone a decent attempt at even and measured. "Settle down. You will hear more in due time."

God, she was young. She looked a bit like Callie, and that made something bitter rise in the back of Shauna's throat. Shauna could see the glint of animal fear in her eyes, deep brown pools that revealed the first primal instinct of girlhood: *flee, flee, flee.*

Shauna's pulse bounded in her throat, at her temples, and she thought about what Willow would look like running. Shauna imagined she'd be fast, but a touch clumsy. Just uncertain enough, on feet that had never braved this terrain, to stumble. Shauna imagined what those eyes might look like when the life left them.

But Willow was too scared, or too smart, or too stubborn. The fear in her eyes—which Shauna hadn't realized until that moment had made her shift her own weight into the balls of her feet, ready to chase—passed as quickly as it had come.

"We need to catch you up." Lottie raised an arm toward Willow. No one in the crowd flinched. Good, that was good. They were naive or they were cocky, and either way that was promising. Lottie clasped her hand on Willow's shoulder and jerked her head back toward the cabin. "Shall we?"

"Where's Morgan?" Willow said softly, too quiet for her own people to hear her.

"Inside," Tai said smoothly.

Willow took an uncertain step forward. Nat clapped her hand on Willow's other shoulder. She was boxed in, Lottie and Nat on either side, the rest of them fanned out to her front and her sides, and the look on her face told Shauna that she understood the significance of that.

"Let's not delay," Lottie said, her tone so assured it came out almost bored. "The sun will be setting soon, hmm? And we've got so much to do."

Willow didn't move.

Jackie stepped closer to her, and Shauna fought the incredible urge to yank her back. Jackie smiled wide, but it didn't reach her eyes, the same shark-like grin she'd worn when Misty had pushed her too far, and she got close enough to Willow that none of Willow's followers would be able to read her lips, as she whispered harshly:

"Tell them whatever it is they need to hear from you to stay calm and stay put."

"I—uh, don't—" Willow stuttered, her first true slip up in this act of false confidence.

"Now," Jackie said sternly through gritted teeth, her mouth still fixed in a smile.

3:16 pm

Willow calmed the crowd easily, though they were strangely docile to begin with—more excited about the spectacle than afraid of what it may mean for them.

Stupid, Jackie thought with the tiniest twinge of unbidden sympathy. So fucking stupid that it was going to be the death of them. But she quickly remembered Callie's face, splotchy red and tear streaked, and her heaving sobs, and the fact that this crowd of freaks had all signed onto the plan to kill an innocent sixteen-year-old girl, and suddenly she didn't feel bad at all.

Willow walked up the stairs herself. She crossed the porch and made it all the way up to the threshold. It wasn't until Tai swung open the door that she started to panic. Her arms flailed, and she inched her heels backwards, but Lottie, Misty, Van, and Jackie formed a

perfect, tight-knit half-circle around her, so that no onlookers would see Shauna and Nat wrangling her into compliance and shoving her through the door.

"Ouch!" Willow gasped as she fell forward, landing on her hands and knees on the bare wood floor.

Misty shut and bolted the door, and Nat had her rifle in her hands less than a second after the click of the lock. But she didn't train it on Willow; she and Van took station at the windows, watching the crowd through barely-there gaps in the curtains.

"Morgan?" Willow asked weakly. Then, louder: "Morgan, where are—"

Shauna dropped to her knees behind Willow, her shins pressing into Willow's calves to pin her legs to the ground, and clamped one hand over Willow's mouth. She used her other arm to bear hug her to her chest.

"Stop talking," she said sternly, her brow furrowed in a way Jackie thought it might when she was disciplining Callie. "If you yell, we'll have to kill you."

"And we don't want to do that," Tai added, her arms crossed against her chest and her weight settled almost casually in one hip. "So, are you capable of staying quiet?"

Willow blinked up at her, mumbled something too muffled by Shauna's hand to be coherent.

Lottie crouched in front of Willow, smoothed a hand over her dark hair. "Morgan's dead," she said softly. "We killed her. And the men she was with."

Willow whined, struggled futilely against Shauna.

"Ah, ah," Lottie shook her head, ran her thumb back and forth against Willow's temple, "be a good girl and listen, and this will all be so easy."

Willow nodded, as much as she could with both Shauna and Lottie's hands fixed on her head, and Shauna slowly freed her mouth. Her lips remained sealed.

"Lottie is going to give a nice speech," Misty said, her smile wide and genuine. 'She's going to explain that the plans have changed, that we're going to choose one of us to hunt,' she waved toward herself and the other Yellowjackets showily, "just the way we used to, that we're going to let them in on the *real* secrets of the wilderness. And you're going to play along. Or you're going to die. Up to you!"

"So… but… Morgan is dead, so you must not actually be—" Willow looked pathetic there, sitting on the ground, wincing when Shauna sank more of her weight down on her and sent her knees and shins pressing against the unforgiving floor. "None of you are willing to die for *it* without a fight. You're all so determined to stay alive. That's why it favored you. So, you… you won't actually be choosing one of you, will you?"

"You wanted to kill my daughter," Shauna all but growled. "You wanted to kill my girlfriend, you simple-minded little cunt. You've read my journals, so you tell me what you think I'm going to do about that?"

Even now, even in the height of the madness, Jackie couldn't help but pull a sour face at the use of the word *girlfriend*, considering they'd had a very beautiful (if not exactly legally-

binding) marriage ceremony less than twenty-four hours ago. She'd tease Shauna about it later, when all of this was over, if only to seek the reassurance that she needed to prove to her that Shauna had *meant* everything she'd said.

"You're going to kill me anyway," Willow said. "So, why would I play along?"

"The ceremony is going to start with a special tea," Misty said. "Sort of like the one you already planned on serving with dinner."

Willow gave a wet, choked sniffle, tears pooling in her eyes.

"No crying," Shauna snapped. "You can't go out there looking like you're scared."

"Crowd's starting to get a little antsy," Nat warned.

Van looked back at them over her shoulder, assessed Shauna and Willow on the ground, and made brief eye contact with Jackie. It made Jackie feel uncomfortably seen, like Van knew that some part of her, deep and buried and hidden away, was enjoying watching Shauna like this.

"We've got some people standing up," Van said. "I'd say we've only got a few more minutes before we get some wandering over."

"Willow," Tai sighed.

She crouched in front of her, where Lottie had been moments ago, and rested her hands on her own knees. She looked as though she were preparing to placate a child, one that she wasn't particularly fond of.

"You can die with all your little followers knowing that you're a fraud who planned on murdering a sizable chunk of them, or you can die and stay the same beloved leader you are to them now. Those are your choices."

"We could just turn them loose on you?" Lottie asked, as though she were genuinely curious what Willow thought of the option. "Some of them seem to resent their positions—unavoidable, really, it always happens—and I'm sure if we told them what your *real* plan was for the evening… well. It just seems like a rather… *messy* option, don't you think?"

"Fine," Willow choked out. "Fine, I get it. I'll play along."

"That's going to have to be good enough," Nat said. "We've got to move."

Shauna and Lottie pulled Willow to her feet. Willow swallowed hard, gazed at each of them in turn, her eyes wide and her spirit so visibly broken.

"You know what they say," Van said, glancing back at her with one hand on the door. "Never meet your heroes."

35. what a beautiful place

Before games, Jackie had tried to be the very last to exit the locker room. As captain her approach had only solidified, become an always rather than a usually: last one out, making sure all her players were on the field. She'd never seen the benefit in forging ahead of them, like the captains before her had done.

Shauna, too, had exited before her, though that had always been hinged on a technicality. Jackie would shoo Shauna out, staying close on her heels, close enough to catch them with her toes, even. Jackie was usually still touching her—grasping her hand or tapping her hip or tugging her ponytail gently—but if you watched their feet carefully, Shauna crossed the threshold first every time.

This game might've been more twisted than any they'd played on a field, but it felt shockingly similar as they headed into it. Jackie watched as Van stepped out first, like she had when she was goalie, hers the longest distance to cross the field. She watched as Lottie and Tai went next, flanking Willow on either side. And, sure, Jackie had to admit that dragging out a hostage from the opposing team might have been a novel occurrence, but metaphors only went so far, and nostalgia was rarely fueled by accuracy. So, Jackie felt a familiar tug of nerves in her gut as Nat fell in behind them, her eyes as much on Lottie as they were on Willow. Jackie studied Misty's careful nod, watched her hands straighten her puffy maroon coat and her feet send her bounding out behind Natalie.

And, just like always, Jackie and Shauna were the last to exit. Shauna's fingers dug firm into Jackie's waist, and Jackie knew that her other hand rested against the blade stashed at her hip. Before Shauna could move, Jackie threw herself at her, her hands on her cheeks and her lips against hers and her body pressing her into the wall, out of sight enough that anyone peeking in through the open door would miss them entirely, brief enough that in the time it took Jackie to pull away, Misty managed only three footfalls, her stride so small the bulky hood of her coat was still in reach, had Jackie wished to lean forward and touch.

"I love you." Jackie pressed their foreheads together, ran her thumbs back and forth against Shauna's cheeks. "I love you so fucking much."

"I love you, too." Shauna gripped Jackie's hips tight enough that she hoped for fresh bruises. "We're so close. We're almost free."

There was so much Jackie wanted to say, so much she wanted to apologize for, to explain, that she felt suddenly as though all these weeks of being attached at the hip, of fighting to get words out through sobs, of memorizing Shauna's body through worshipful, reverent touch, had been but a moment, a blink, a dream that she'd woken from too soon. But, as it had gone since the moment they'd been reunited, there was no time for more.

Shauna walked ahead of Jackie, but it wasn't like it had once been. Instead of Jackie pushing Shauna ahead, she led Jackie. She ushered Jackie through the door after her, guiding Jackie to a place that allowed her to keep her body between Jackie and the crowd, with a hand

on Jackie's hip to ensure she didn't move out of line, and her eyes on the onlookers to ensure they didn't so much as twitch out of place.

Nat stood two paces behind Lottie, and just one to her right. Years ago—in a different forest filled with different trees and different girls, where the lack of snow at the turn of the year would've been even more suspicious than it was here—it would have been Van's feet planted where Nat's were now. Nat had always been more suited to playing the weight on the other end of the scale, balancing Lottie from a distance so set it meant that she could never quite reach her.

But, here, now, Nat had to do little more than raise her left arm to graze the long, red scarf that Lottie wore around her shoulders. Nat blinked the urge away. When her eyes opened she saw a fresh deer pelt draped in its place, blood red dripping down Lottie's white coat, staining. She blinked again, harder, and saw fabric, but this time the long hair caught beneath it bore no streaks of gray.

Misty cleared her throat pointedly. Nat knew the worried sound was meant for her. She met Misty's gaze. Misty tilted her head, already wide eyes stretching wider— *Natalie, are you okay?* —and Nat nodded. When she looked back to Lottie, there was solid red, and there was solid white, and there were the two streaks of gray that Nat had taken to curling around her fingers, wrapping tight around her palm like the beaded strands of a rosary.

"The will of the wilderness is one that even I cannot pretend to predict without some surprises along the path," Willow said, her voice reaching a register that snapped Nat back to full attention. "That's part of It's beauty, and I would like to take a moment to thank It for this gift—every living survivor of Flight 2525—"

Nat fought the urge to kill her then, thought she might be able to snap her neck if she got the grip right, because Travis was the only survivor no longer living, and she was the only reason he wasn't.

"—delivered to this, The Sequester, our labor to produce a setting fit for It's will—"

Willow motioned to their surroundings, her arms sweeping broad in an illusion of steady strength, but her fingers shook. Not enough for most people to take notice, but enough to set Nat on edge, worried that a few people in the crowd of duds might be just keen enough to sense that something was off.

"to offer It the return of one of It's own—"

Nat shifted focus quickly to Shauna, to ensure that she fought the same urge Nat had moments ago, to make sure no one got jumped early and killed out of turn. Nat found her still and steel-faced, her rage controlled, building to be released the very moment it could, and thought idly that maybe the two of them could kill Willow together, plunging twin knives in spots that wouldn't do the job immediately, so that they could each see themselves as her end in the blood pooling around her.

"—and it provided us seven-fold more."

The others sat to their left on one long log, close enough to the crowd that they could pretend to be a part of it, but far enough away that their pretense was shaky at best. Van and Shauna flanked Jackie, and Nat was surprised that Shauna had discovered enough self restraint not to stick Jackie in front of her, sit her between her legs, zip her up into her coat until they were one mass with two heads.

"We shall follow It's guidance and we shall hear, directly from It's first known channel, what plans it has for us tonight."

There were steady applause, along with scattered whoops and cheers that made bile rise in Nat's throat. But the noise of them covered Lottie enough that, just before she took to the front of the crowd, she tugged Nat's arm and leaned close to speak in her ear.

"Are you *sure* we can't keep them?"

"Lot," Nat said sternly, entirely unsure whether the beautiful, terrifying, certifiably insane woman gripping her elbow was kidding.

Lottie frowned, and it clarified nothing. "Just a few?"

"No." Nat pinched her side gently. "We've talked about this."

Lottie shrugged, then she took Willow's place.

"I feel so blessed to be here with you, and what a beautiful place we've been called to," Lottie said. She smiled as she spoke, not wide enough to be unsettling given the circumstance. It was, as always, the perfect balance of respectful and commanding energies. "Now, I know you all had expectations for tonight, but we must never let the sight of our desires eclipse that of our duties."

Van could feel the eyes on Jackie. She knew all of them could. Shauna had an arm crossed in front of Jackie's lap, her hand secured on the outside of Jackie's thigh. Van was sitting close enough to Jackie that she felt Shauna's knuckles against her own leg.

"Never once did we know who was meant to be sacrificed until the time came," Lottie said. Van tuned out the rest of her words, which amounted to a gentle scolding from a parent who had done the legwork necessary to know that her children would listen.

Van thought maybe she was imagining things, told herself she was putting a spotlight on Jackie that wasn't really there. Because who was Jackie in the scheme of this, really? These people were obsessed with the lore of it all, with the pseudo-religion, with the spiritual cycle of sacrifice and reward?

Well, Jackie was the least involved among them. She'd been dragged into distant compliance, kicking and screaming quite literally, then dissociated her way through. Shauna and Nat and Taissa may have fought the ideas, argued against them when they didn't suit them, but that didn't make them less integral. They'd wrestled with this. They'd done horrible, unspeakable things for this. And what had Jackie done?

Jackie Taylor was so clearly supposed to be a normal woman, with a normal life.

Van wanted to scream it at them, at this crowd of fucking idiots, because no. She hadn't been imagining it. Their eyes strayed from Lottie onto Jackie, shifty and beady as rats. Here Jackie was, as she had always been, drawing the attention of a crowd that was focused on her for nothing she had done, for all the wrong reasons.

Lottie's speech was coming to a crescendo, its summary: there will be no slaughtering of Jackie Taylor tonight. There will instead be ritual and rule and organized chaos.

A man in the front row leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and stared far more openly than the rest. His lips twitched with what Van thought must've been a smile. Her stomach dropped. For the first time she thought about it— *really* thought about it—and the realization knocked the wind out of her.

For every handful of lost, grieving souls who were drawn to this group out of sheer, stupid interest in the story that Willow had woven out of half-truths and bastardized recountings, there must be at least one of these people: the kind with eyes that show no warmth, with mannerisms that display just how little reverence they feel toward the wilderness, with a sick smirk on their face. And those people were here for standard, typical, un-mystical violence.

It was a strange thing to experience—and they all seemed to be experiencing it at once, as far as Van could tell, because Tai moved, slow, as though afraid to do anything sudden, and before Van could slam her back beside her, she was sitting on a stump in front of Jackie, perched with half her weight in her feet. Nat was scanning the crowd from behind Lottie, and she locked eyes with Misty for only half a second before Misty was side-stepping toward them, taking up a new post, standing directly behind Jackie. Lottie's voice faltered, just barely, not enough for anyone but them to catch it. Shauna looked as though she was just moments from going rogue, and Van couldn't blame her.

"We must all drink the ritual tea, as it thins the veil between us," Lottie's hands and eyes swept through the crowd in tandem, in that way she had that made everyone feel as though she was singling them out specifically, 'and the spiritual realm. And then, together,' Lottie reached for Willow's hand, and when Willow took it she seemed almost to be as enchanted as the crowd, as though she'd momentarily forgotten that this was all staged, they she was on the chopping block along with the others, "we will channel the wilderness and It will tell us *if*, and who, we are to hunt tonight."

There was a comfort that came from having done horrible things. You'd find yourself less afraid, like you'd gotten a cheat code in life. It was no longer scary to be a woman walking alone in the dark. Awareness remained, sure, but for the most part they were simply less afraid of the things women have to be afraid of. That was their one prize for living through what they had, and it wasn't without strings.

The things that scared Van were unique: grocery stores, with their bright lights and aisles of raw meat on ice; indoor concerts, or basketball games, or anything else that jammed too many people in a small space with no view of the outside; barking dogs and any kind of plane, of course. But the usual suspects? A man walking quicker behind her on the street, drunk idiots getting into a fight in her bar, that kind of thing?

Not only had Van seen much worse, she'd done much worse. There was no better shield from that sort of fear than the knowledge that you yourself had done things that normal people, even awful people, would never be able to dream of. Most of the survivors carried

that knowledge, that confidence in themselves, that unbridled sense that in any given room, the scariest person was likely to be them. That was why the seven of them together had been so fucking terrifying. Their impromptu high school reunion had been a who's who of danger and psychosis, the primary question being who will snap and bare her teeth the quickest, who among them still bites.

Van watched the rest of them go through the same thing she was. It was indescribably strange, to know that you yourself were, technically and truly and intentionally and unavoidably, a cannibal and a murderer, and to experience the sudden, terrifying realization that you had allowed yourself to be surrounded by a very different type of cannibal and murderer.

Van had killed a lot of people. Most of them indirectly, but that didn't really make a difference.

But Jackie? Van had kept her *alive*. Lottie may have been wrong about the whys, but she had been right about the outcomes. Jackie had survived because they'd made it so. She couldn't have made it any other way. Even Shauna's protection wouldn't have been enough. Jackie would've shunned what they did outright. She would've either been killed for it, or died quickly and quietly in a corner. She never would've eaten had she known, had Van not painstakingly concealed what she was really giving Jackie as rations.

Jackie had gone from a sometimes annoying friend of circumstance, to someone Van couldn't stand to look at after the plane went down and she left her there to burn, to her project: her only person, aside from Taissa, to keep alive, come hell or high water. And Taissa had done a hell of a lot of surviving all on her own. Van couldn't take credit for Tai's survival, couldn't even kid herself into it. But Van was the reason Jackie was alive, and, over the years since their return, more than once, more even than Van could count on her fingers, Jackie had been the reason Van was alive.

Van was not about to let some wannabe Heaven's Gate freaks and the wannabe Jeffery Dahmer's among them change that.

Lottie didn't prick a fingertip like she might've back then. She sliced into the meat of her palm at a hard diagonal. Tai watched as she squeezed, her palm facing up. She clenched her fist hard enough that the blood pooled in her cupped hand and poured over the sides. Inefficient, Tai thought, but she couldn't deny that it was theatrical. Tai had already verified that their own tea, the tea that was stashed very much separately in cups that were already filled, did not have any of Lottie's blood in it.

Half of the onlookers seemed thrilled, absolutely in awe of their luck. Fucking grade-A freaks. Even the most zealous among the Yellowjackets had been more resigned to some perceived need when drinking the blood-tea than excited by the prospect. And they'd been battling the sort of iron deficiencies that likely would've excused the behavior as understandable to most medical professionals.

Nat stirred the contents of the large metal bowl with a cheap plastic ladle that had probably come from the messy, afterthought of a kitchen utensils aisle at Ikea. Nat was unsuccessfully hiding her feelings about it, her nose scrunched in disgust. Disgust with the crowd, Tai knew,

more than the bloodied drink itself. This level of gore was nothing compared to what they'd done, and what they'd done was nothing compared to what they were about to do.

But, amongst the awed faces, Tai noted some who bore disappointment on theirs. A few of the men in particular seemed to be eyeing Jackie like a gourmet meal that had been snatched off their table the moment they'd raised their forks.

Hunger was dangerous. Tai often found the act of eating disgusting. But she made sure that she kept the people she loved fed at regular intervals, because there was nothing worse than eating when starving. Simone had thought it was funny at first, the way Tai always made sure she ate—never showing up at her apartment empty handed, always suggesting they stop for a bite in the middle of a long day of errands. Then, once Simone had realized why Taissa's name sounded so familiar, she'd found it endearing, a little heartbreaking.

But Tai wasn't just making sure that Simone didn't ever feel that deep gnawing of true hunger because of the basic explanation that any therapist hack might provide. Taissa didn't like to watch people eat when they were too hungry. She'd stopped going to her parents for holidays, because her mother never ate on those days until she finally sat down to dinner, and Tai couldn't watch her teeth gnash or listen to her thick swallows. She'd forced Sammy to stop playing and eat before he felt the hunger come on, because watching him smack his lips and dirty his hands from fingertips to palms—like any toddler would, like every kid did—made her nauseous.

Some of the people in this crowd were starving. Imagining what they'd be like if they got the chance to eat what they were hungry for helped Tai feel better about their fates.

Misty, who had found a moment to return to center-stage once the tea ceremony portion of the evening began and seized it, nudged Willow in the side and nodded. Willow stepped forward, made the same sweeping motion that was apparently lesson 101 in the Cult Leaders course, which Tai suspected they might actually teach up at Bennington.

"It's time," Willow said. "Remember, as we open our hands to receive this blessing, we must open our hearts to it as well."

"We'll bring your cups to you," Lottie announced, wrapping her bloodied hand in the same scarf she'd bandaged it with after Shauna had asked them to cut themselves on their arrival to the woods, as though it had been nothing more extreme than the suggested donation at the entrance of the Met. "And it's very important that nobody drinks out of turn. We will wait until everyone has their—"

A man stood up—not the one who had been leering at Jackie, but one who Tai had noted lacked the distinct zealot sparkle that many of them possessed.

"I thought we drank after the hunt," he bellowed. "You told us—"

"We talked about this, Matthew," Willow said, playing her part without any nudging, in a way that told Tai they'd guessed correctly before—she knew some of her little acolytes were worth fearing, she didn't want to find out what would happen to her if they snitched on the plan. "We've been shown the proper path. We must follow."

"I know change can come as a shock," Lottie said, "but that's what It asks of—"

“You haven’t even told us what we’re doing tonight,” the man’s voice shook slightly, but he had the determined look of someone who had spent a lot of time shoring himself up mentally to speak and was intent on following through. “All you keep saying is It will choose, but how do we know what It is choosing?”

There were more murmurs of dissent, some chatter amongst themselves, a few more sheep rising to stand. Willow and Lottie spouted off more bullshit new age rhetoric, but it wasn’t working. Shauna’s right hand was tense on her hip, her left hand gripping Jackie’s thigh even tighter, and Tai knew they were about thirty seconds from Shauna deciding to stab now, ask questions later.

Tai sighed, then she leaned forward. She felt Van hook a finger in her belt loop, as though she may try and wade into the freaks. She, of course, had no such aspirations.

The one good thing about people who had to take a long time to shore themselves up to speak, even on things they were so passionate about they quit their lives and joined a fucking freak cult about it, was that they were generally very easy to shut up.

“Matthew,” Tai said sternly. He flinched, as though surprised she knew his name, clearly having forgotten that it was announced less than a minute ago. “The people in charge are speaking. Sit down and listen, okay?”

A few of the women around him smiled and smirked. He opened his mouth once more, floundering, then let it fall closed at the same time that his ass hit the log.

“Thank you, Taissa,” Lottie said. “Let’s begin.”

Tai, Van, Shauna, Misty and—to everyone’s discomfort—Jackie, handed out the cups. Lottie and Willow remained at the front, their intense gaze the chosen crowd control method. Lottie filled the cups. Nat watched over her shoulder, searching the crowd for dissent, itching to reach for the gun that Tai knew was tucked just inside her black jacket.

“Did you get a headcount?” Tai whispered to her, as they accepted their third round of cups to hand out to the crowd.

“Forty-three,” Nat answered, barely moving her lips.

Forty-three people that they had to ensure never walked out of the forest they’d willingly hiked into. Fucking hell.

It hurt to watch them drink.

Lottie took a sip from her own cup, the memory evoked by the bitter taste of pine needles enough to choke her even without poison. She made sure the others were drinking, to keep up the illusion. All of them had returned to their log up front, aside from herself. Even Natalie had trudged back when Lottie had instructed her to. It didn’t look right for Lottie to need a handler, it was the logical choice, but Nat had fumed as though being sent to the bench mid-game.

Lottie had to protect her own, no matter the cost. She felt a warmth in her chest, seeing them all lined up, tucked aside safely.

But knowing that Willow's followers drinking to their deaths was necessary didn't alleviate the concurrent pain of it.

Lottie knew that they were misguided, and she thought there was a chance that she could bring some of them around to the right path if she had the time. But time was something they had precious little of. Time lost, they all carried in spades: the time Lottie might have had with Laura Lee, had she stopped her from flying that plane, or the time she would've had with Natalie, had she not been too afraid to face her.

All of them could lament their time lost. Could, after this time together, draw conclusions on exactly what they would've done if they'd never parted, but Lottie thought most about the time that Jackie and Shauna had lost. Not because it was worse than anyone else's—though judging on the way Shauna behaved, it very well might have been—but because it was time that Lottie herself had stolen away. It had been the right thing to do at the time. She didn't doubt that, even now. But she should have come clean decades ago, rather than pressure Jackie to stay small and quiet and afraid of what Shauna really thought of her.

Lottie hated dishonestly. It weighed heavily on the soul. And the lies she'd fed Jackie and Shauna had been anchors on her for years. So it was a selfish desire, too, to make sure that they enjoyed all the time they had left, without the looming threat of it all ending at the hands of this misguided group. Lottie had limited time left herself, and she'd quite like to spend it wrapped around Nat, with a conscience less burdened by past regret.

Besides, these people were trying to murder one of them. They were broken in ways that would be so incredibly difficult to mend, choosing this life when they'd not been forced into it. The pain that must've driven them here was likely unbearable. So, all in all, Lottie decided that putting them out of their misery was the right thing to do.

The issue, as it always was, was the existence of stragglers. It was hard to track who had taken sips of their tea and who hadn't, but Lottie knew that not all of them had. There was a ripple in the crowd, and, carried on it, the knowledge that something was wrong.

Keeping track hadn't been easy, but Misty was fairly certain that thirty-one people had drank the tea, though she wasn't sure how many had taken more than sips, and she wasn't confident that sips would be enough. So the math was complicated.

There were two pods of problem members of this group, and Misty felt she had eyes on them. One toward the back left, a group of women who were huddled together and whose cups they raised to their lips at even intervals, but didn't tilt back enough for Misty to believe they were taking real sips. And the second group in the middle right, more men than women, more anger than worry.

But, just when Misty decided they'd at least be able to push off the hands-on portion of the evening until after those who drank were too far gone to fight among the ranks, twigs started snapping violently enough to draw everyone's attention. Wolves, Misty thought with a burst of fear that shocked her. But, no. Wolves didn't let you hear them coming. A bear, maybe? But why would a bear approach a group this size?

It was worse than any of the things Misty had conjured up in her quick imagination: a man barreled out from between two trees, red-faced and panting, making a scene. When he got close enough, she realized it was their own mistake come back to haunt them. She recognized this man. He was the one who had gotten away when they'd been caught briefly. He looked forest-worn in a way the rest of the cult members never could've imagined, and Misty felt a small burst of satisfaction for that, at least.

"They killed Lacey and Seline!" the man screamed.

Murmurs broke out, a few of the cult members rose to help the man as he pitched forward and braced his hands on his knees. Lottie tried to get control of the situation, but it was too late. Their backs were to her, their attention on the man. He looked up at the crowd, his face drenched with sweat and smudged with dirt.

"We caught them sneaking around. I left to get help and when I came back Lacey was fucking—fucking gutted and Seline's feet were hanging off! Cuts all over her body!"

The seal was broken. Every question that Misty had suspected had been bubbling on their lips boiled over. Shouts echoed off the trees:

"*Where's Morgan?"*

"*Andrew and James wouldn't just miss this!"*

"*There's no way they'd just leave!"*

"*Morgan would never!"*

The crowd was unruly, standing and shouting. The Yellowjackets were on their feet, too. There was no use trying to get them to sit. They were incapable of riding this out, even if it had been salvageable. Misty rose with them, noticed their hands on their barely-hidden weapons.

"Misty," Shauna asked under her breath, "how long does it take?"

Misty palmed the handle of her blade nervously. "About fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes?" Tai whispered harshly. "You didn't think to tell us that sooner?"

"You didn't ask!"

They were tipping into all out war, and they were far more outnumbered than Misty would have preferred.

Then, Willow brought the situation from tipping to full-on spinning out of control with a crazed shriek: "It's poison! Don't drink it, it's poison!"

Lottie snatched Willow from behind before anyone could react. At Willow's throat glinted a knife with a blade smaller than Misty's pinky. It was stark in its brightness, cleaner than any other among them because Lottie, through all of this, had not yet resorted to drawing it.

"Let's all calm down, shall we?" Lottie yelled.

Silence fell. Nobody moved. Misty watched them calculating, her own deciding whether striking or relying on a hostage would get them further; Willow's deciding just how much

they were willing to sacrifice for her safety.

Cups dropped in the dirt, tea spilling out. Some were set down gingerly, as though in fear they might become animate and attack. And, in the biggest surprise of all, one woman—impossibly young, far too skinny for someone who had not truly been stuck in the wilderness, her hands shaking violently—drank.

"Caroline!" a few voices rang out.

"She's the one who started it," the girl—Caroline—said, her voice timid at first, then growing with her fervor. 'She's the one who knows what It wants. Willow,' her lip trembled, but she carried on, "you may be a—a false prophet."

Two more in the crowd slowly raised their cups and drank.

Idiots.

It worked against them in the end, even if it meant that three more of their opponents would drop dead in approximately fifteen minutes, because in the stillness of the shock Willow managed to elbow Lottie in the stomach. Lottie swayed backwards, and Willow escaped with nothing but a barely visible line of red dripping down the side of her neck.

The crowd surged, a few of them running away, most of them running forward. Shots rang out, and the runners were the ones who crumpled. Nat had a rifle aimed at the perimeter, one she must've stashed behind a tree in secret, because Misty hadn't known about it. Nat couldn't aim at the center mass, Misty knew, because there was no longer any way to ensure she didn't hit one of their own. The best bet was to pick off the stragglers, but they seemed to understand that, too, because no more ran.

It was far too loud, but Misty could pick out some of their voices among the chaos.

"Try and fall back!" Nat screamed.

Van elbowed a man in the nose, drew her knife and slashed at his throat when he tipped his head back and exposed it. "Little busy here!"

"Jackie!" Shauna shrieked.

"Got it, got it!" Jackie answered, in the same tone she might've used had it been a pass that Shauna was setting up for her, and Misty heard a body thud to the ground behind her.

Misty dodged a knife, dug her own between the ribs of the girl who held it and pushed hard to the side, until she felt a rush of warmth pour over her hand.

Jackie really fucking hated this.

She hated stabbing, just generally. She'd never killed somebody with anything but a gun before, and even that had felt too personal. And why, Jackie lamented, did her most hands-on murder to date have to have been a woman who didn't look any older than twenty-five, rather than one of the men whose eyes she'd felt on her all day? Taking out one of those men would've brought her virtually no guilt, Jackie thought. But no, of course not. That would've been too easy.

She wanted to keep eyes on all of her old teammates, but there was no way. It was moving too fast, and there were guns in the mix. She heard shots fired, and she couldn't follow them to their source or to their target. Her heart thudded in her chest.

A small group huddled in the logs, people Jackie assumed must've taken the poisoned tea and didn't want to spend their last moments fighting. And, close enough to clockwork to be eerie, Jackie heard coughing, sputtering, gagging. People dropped to their knees. Some vomited, some just gasped for breath that wouldn't come.

It was horrible. All of this was just so fucking horrible she wanted to scream.

And then—beside herself, too far gone to access any judgment, let alone her better judgment—Jackie did scream. The crowd was thinned, things were beginning to slow, but Willow was back. And in her hands, aimed directly at Shauna, she held a gun not unlike the one Jackie favored.

Shauna couldn't think straight.

She needed to think straight. But it had all gone to shit, to utter fucking chaos, and there was a gun trained on her, which on its own may not have been enough to land her in this suspended animation, freeze response of a terrified doe. But feet away from Willow, and her gun, Shauna could see a knife glinting at Tai's chest, just over her heart, and a pair of large, filthy hands wrapped around Jackie's throat.

They weren't fighting. They could've fought. Jackie could've slipped out of his grip. She was small and fast and knew to throw herself to the ground to break that hold. Tai could've gotten her hands on forearms, pushed with all her might, made space and twisted around until the knife was aimed nowhere in particular.

But neither of them moved.

They remained fixed in place, staring at Shauna, staring at the stupid fucking girl who held a gun aimed at her torso. Their mouths opened. Their lips moved as tears streamed down their faces, and Shauna realized then that she couldn't hear anything. Not what they were saying, not what Willow said in return, not the chaos around them that had been overwhelming in its volume moments ago. All Shauna could hear was her own heartbeat, the rush of her blood in her ears.

Until a shot rang out.

She thought she'd been hit, at first, but she hadn't cared. She'd watched as Jackie slammed the heel of her boot into her captor's shin and finally sank down, watched as Tai shifted the knife over her shoulder and used the man's hands to guide the blade against his own throat. She didn't know where the others were, didn't know whether they were even alive, but that was enough. It had to be enough. She inhaled, braced herself for the pain, but it didn't come.

"*Mom!*"

Shauna thought for a moment that she had died, and that the voice was of the child she'd lost years ago. But, no. That voice belonged to Callie. Shauna knew it did. And so, for

another fleeting moment, Shauna thought that Callie had died, too. That she hadn't really made it out.

But before she could mourn either of her daughters, Shauna was dumped unceremoniously back into reality, her eyes caught by the movement of one of the cult freaks dropping to her knees beside a motionless Willow, at the same time that Jackie's voice finally broke through to her.

"Callie?" Jackie screamed.

Shauna and Jackie broke out into a run at the same time, their feet carrying them at an even pace, while Tai took Willow's gun from the ground and shot the girl on her knees beside her.

"Callie, come here, honey!" Jackie kept yelling as she ran. "It's okay, come here, come here."

Shauna couldn't speak. She didn't have the words, nor the breath to form them. Callie didn't run, but she did stumble toward them like a new foal on weak, trembling legs, letting the gun fall from her grasp and onto the dirt by her feet. Shauna knew what Callie must be feeling, could remember the shakiness, the storm of the after. Her daughter, only sixteen, had just killed someone for the first time, and Shauna had never understood her better.

They crashed in the middle. Shauna took Callie and Jackie into her arms, pressing them against each other, against herself, until she felt like she was close enough, until she felt like she may be able to draw them into her own body, place them safe beneath her own flesh and carry them out of this.

"Mom," Callie sobbed, over and over.

Jackie caught Shauna's eyes, her own wide with horror, and, just beneath it, relief. Shauna kissed her temple, then the top of Callie's head. Callie's hair was dirty. She smelled of earth and frightened sweat and her father's shitty car air freshener.

"Cal, it's okay. It's okay," Shauna repeated, because nothing felt sufficient. And then, once Callie's cries had slowed enough that she may actually hear it: "Thank you."

36. one more night

Jackie had imagined this reunion more than once. She'd pictured it, sketching out the image of Shauna and Callie seeing one another again behind eyes fixed close in fruitless attempts at sleep. Each time, the Jackie of her visions had been visibly out of place, awkward and fumbling, and that assumption was likely exactly why she'd fixated on it. It was an old habit, the urge to replay fears in hopes of course correcting before they could come true. She'd also assumed, understandably so, that the reunion would come later, under much different circumstances—ones where the danger had been dealt with, where Jeff would be lurking in the background, a mirror to her own clumsy presence, where Jackie could, at the very least, hang back and allow Shauna a moment with her daughter.

But anxious minds were an imprecise tool, deceptive as often as prophetic. Shauna and Callie were reuniting now and, in this harsher, messier reality of it, Jackie felt simply as though she was finally where she belonged. She squeezed Callie's arm as Shauna hugged her tight and felt neither too aloof nor too intrusive. She studied Shauna's face carefully when Callie released Shauna and hugged her in turn, and she found nothing there but love.

So, not out of place with them, which was something that Jackie would celebrate privately later, jumping up and down in a bathroom growing thick with fog from the running shower, a ritual in memoriam of her bright-eyed eighteen year old self, who had once snuck away to celebrate such seemingly comparable wins as making captain or securing Shauna a treasured gift. But definitely out of place generally speaking, because this was still a battlefield. A battlefield that Callie was now on— *thank God she was, thank God she'd come, thank God Shauna was alive* —and if Callie was on it, that meant that—

"Sadie?" Van screamed.

Fuck. That meant that Sadie was, too.

Jackie surveyed the scene, her eyes sweeping over the carnage to seek the living among it, both the still-breathing threats and the women who threatened to break her heart if their own stopped beating.

She searched for Sadie and Van, first. They were on the perimeter, a few yards from where Jackie stood with Shauna and Callie, both unharmed. Jackie made eye contact, but she couldn't risk running toward them. She was getting her bearings back, the initial shock of almost losing Shauna, of seeing Callie in this mess, had abated. Now, it was all strategy. All getting the fuck out of this mess alive. Shauna had snapped back, too, Jackie realized with a quick sigh of relief. With cautious, fluid movements, she took the gun Callie had fired and passed it off to Jackie, pulled her own knife from its holster, and produced a switchblade from her back pocket, which she placed into Callie's trembling hands.

Tai and Misty stood back to back in the heart of it, so close that their curls brushed against each other, threatening to tangle, stirring in Jackie a memory of Shauna giggling as Jackie braided strands of her hair through her own. Tai and Misty's weapons remained raised in vain, for there was nowhere worthwhile to sink a bullet or a blade.

Lottie was crouched over a young woman who looked dead, aside from feet and hands that still twitched sporadically, as though energy was being artificially channeled through her lifeless corpse. Jackie noticed Lottie's fingers wrapping around a large rock just in time to twist Callie's chin to the side and avert her gaze. They both flinched at the violent, cracking *thwack* that followed.

Nat stood perched on a large, lopsided stump, the clear remnant of a tree fallen rather than felled. It was as close to high ground as she could get in this setting without testing whether the ability to scramble up weak lower branches remained intact with age. Her eyes narrowed as she swept the perimeter, her energy somehow at once more frantic and steadier than Jackie's.

That was all of them accounted for, once again given the familiar gift of life against all odds, the gift that Jackie herself had resented for years after she'd had it thrust upon her, the one that still came coupled with the sick, creeping suspicion of a force that had its claw buried deep, unwilling to part with its toys until it was ready to tear them apart itself. Jackie kicked that fear down, forcing her focus to threats that she could actually see. As for the cult members, the only ones visible were dead or dying. Jackie didn't have time to count, but she didn't have to. There weren't enough.

Jackie jerked her head toward the center, where Tai and Misty stood frozen in their readiness. Shauna seemed to realize what she was thinking immediately, or maybe she'd come to the same conclusion on her own in the mere seconds since they'd begun to assess the situation, because she turned to face the treeline, her knife held firm. Van took Sadie by the arm at the same time that Jackie took Callie, and together they moved inward.

Jackie waited until they were closer to the others than the perimeter to say it aloud: "Everybody fall in."

"What's the count?" Tai asked, the spell of silent anticipation broken.

"Thirty-six," Nat answered immediately.

They met in the middle, in the one space where no bodies littered the ground. Jackie pulled Sadie into a heedless, crushing hug the moment they were close enough, unable to hold back any longer.

"Oh, honey," she whispered, her wits about her just enough to keep her voice low. She rubbed Sadie's back in firm, wide circles, just as she had when Sadie was a little girl, pink in the face from crying about one of Siobhan's biting remarks, or shivering cold after playing out in the snow too long. "Where's Midori?"

"Back at the trailhead," Sadie said. 'She's with Jeff. We snuck out.' Shauna stiffened at Jeff's name, Jackie could sense it even though she wasn't looking her direction. "You scared the shit out of me," Sadie sniffled into Jackie's shoulder. "Thank God. Thank God you're okay."

Jackie knew Sadie was holding back, was both proud that she was managing to and shattered that she had been put in a position where she had to. Jackie allowed herself one more kiss to the crown of Sadie's head, then released her into the middle of the circle, where Shauna had already pushed Callie behind herself. The women surrounded the girls, their

backs to them and their weapons raised toward the treeline that made a near perfect concentric circle to their own.

“They probably ran,” Tai said. “They could be a mile away by now, maybe even two, in any direction.”

“They probably did,” Nat said, “but we can’t be sure.”

“We should sweep the cabin,” Shauna said. She made to move, but Jackie gripped her wrist tight, her nails digging in hard enough to make her wince.

“What’s going on?” Sadie demanded.

Van, standing shoulder to shoulder with Jackie on her other side, made quick eye contact. Her lips pursed, her eyes begging for advice that she knew Jackie didn’t have, couldn’t possibly have, because there was no way to fix this. This wasn’t a court battle for custody or a mangled stuffed rabbit. Jackie and Van couldn’t smooth this over, couldn’t hide the worst parts of it from Sadie.

“Were they… were they sick?” Sadie said. “Is there something—”

“Mom…” Callie’s voice was eerily calm, and she hesitated just long enough to give the same determined inhale that Shauna always had before saying something she didn’t exactly want to say, “you guys did this, didn’t you?”

Their collective silence was answer enough.

“Oh my God,” Sadie whispered. “Okay. Okay, well, it was—it—it was self defense, right? I mean—”

“We can talk about it later, sweetie,” Van said, shooting Jackie a look that said *cover me.* Jackie nodded and Van turned, pulling Sadie into another hug. ‘Soon,’ Van corrected. “We’ll be out of here real soon, okay?”

“Let’s sweep the cabin,” Tai said. “Shauna was right.”

Misty and Lottie went, not exactly the recon team that Jackie would have chosen, but one she had to trust. One they all had to, and that knowledge had clearly settled among the group: they had to believe in each other, there was no time for squabbling, no room for doubt. They wouldn’t have any vantage point, soon. In all their careful planning, they’d forgotten one thing. The sun was setting. Their flashlights, along with the bonfire in the near distance and the few torches set up in regular intervals by the cult prior to their arrival, had been the perfect lighting for last night’s activities. But for this? Jackie didn’t want to know what would come when the sun set on them.

It took Misty and Lottie a few minutes, during which the others scanned their surroundings for signs of movement that never came.

“It’s clear,” Misty said, Lottie trailing out behind her, nodding her agreement.

“Good,” Shauna said. “Jackie, take the girls inside.”

Two voices joined Jackie’s in perfect unison: “No.”

Callie and Sadie were shooting Shauna the same look that Jackie was, and Shauna seemed to be unsure what to do with all three of them disagreeing. She blinked at the girls, then at Jackie, who shrugged. She didn't have a better answer, but she knew that wasn't it. It wasn't even her pride. It wasn't some unwillingness to take the less physical approach, to hide and wait it out. Protecting Callie, and now Callie and Sadie, had been Jackie's objective this whole time, beyond any other. She wouldn't have squabbled over being tasked with it, and she didn't have someone else in mind to do a better job than she could. It was just that something in her gut was telling her, screaming at her, that it was the wrong choice.

"Jax," Shauna said. "I need you to—"

"I have a bad feeling," Jackie said, unable to arrange any other words, anything more logical or convincing. "I just think it's a bad idea."

Van, who Jackie had felt watching her intensely, made heavy eye contact with Shauna, and something shifted.

"Okay," Shauna conceded. "So, what? We hike them out?"

"It isn't that far," Sadie said. "We're really only five or six miles from where they're parked."

"Half of us stay, half of us go?" Van asked.

"I don't think that leaves us with enough people," Nat said. "Splitting up feels like a mistake. We all go, get them to the car and out of here, then we come back and finish—"

"Awooooooo!"

Van jumped first, heard the howling a fraction of second before the rest of them, but it became clear as more noises joined that it had come from a human, rather than an animal. Some new, twisted ritual, Jackie assumed. Something the Patagonia-clad freaks did to feel closer to nature.

"Is that…" Lottie trailed off, none of her frequent put-on air of intrigue, simply true, cautious recognition.

"It can't be," Tai said.

Jackie had missed something, clearly. She tried to catch Shauna's eye, but Shauna was laser focused on the treeline, tense and ready, bracing herself for something Jackie couldn't begin to imagine.

"Aiy, aiy, aiy, aiy!"

"Ca-caw, ca-caw!"

"They—they had Shauna's journals," Misty said, her voice pitching toward true terror for the first time since this had begun. "Maybe it's…" She, too, trailed to nothing.

They were definitely humans—young, female voices ringing out. Jackie caught herself turning to check, momentarily convinced that Sadie and Callie had slipped away somehow, squeezed right past her and ran off into the night without her noticing. But they were there,

strawberry blonde and deep brunette hair swinging against their shoulders as they searched for the source of the sounds, just as their mothers were.

"How the fuck is this happening?" Nat asked. Jackie startled at the desperation in her tone.

Hearing Nat break into fear like that, hearing her off-balance and out of control in a situation like this, made Jackie's stomach drop, lead-heavy. It left, in its absence, too much room in her chest—a gnawing, hungry space that no inhale could satiate.

"Mom?" the twin trembling voices of Callie and Sadie rang out. Hushed, young, like little girls who had sensed how seriously they were meant to keep their quiet, but couldn't help but break it.

"Shauna?" Jackie asked, when the only answer to their pleas was the cacophony of strange noise growing closer with each passing second, hooting and baying and hissing nearer.

"Shhh," Shauna shushed Jackie, clipped in a way that would've offended Jackie if it hadn't instead scared her too much to feel anything else. "I—I'm thinking.

"Thinking what?" Jackie demanded. "Care to enlighten me here?"

"Thinking," Lottie said, "about whether they're trying to help us, or them."

An answer came before Jackie understood the question, in the form of a man—sprinting in the way one only did when they were being chased, his distraught face lit eerily by the sun's final bow, a deep orange glow that meant it would soon retire, leaving them to whatever silver dregs the moon was kind enough to offer.

"There's more girls!" the man shrieked. "They're everywhere, they're—"

He stumbled, fell forward, and landed perfectly in a trap that Jackie knew hadn't been there when the night had begun. They'd sweeped the land, and re-sweeped, and sweeped again. And yet, as brush was cleared by the motion of his fall, the displacement of air carrying leaves gracefully out of the way, a set of spikes was revealed, laid intentionally into the dirt. They weren't long enough to go through the man's body, but the blood that pooled around him was a clear enough indicator that he would be dead in less than a minute.

One more down, six to go, Jackie thought, unable to prevent herself from reveling in the relief of being that much closer to done with this, as she watched the dirt run red.

"Oh my God," Sadie gasped. "Fuck, fuck, what the *fuck?"*

"It's okay," Jackie said. "It's okay. We're okay."

She knew it to be true, but she had no logical explanation for the knowledge. There was no part of her that could lay out a sound argument, no fact or reason behind it, no explicable indicators any more than there were for the fire pits at the four corners of The Manor's property, for the way burning the right things in them on arrival had always meant safety, seclusion in the best sense of the word. Some things simply were.

The following minutes passed much as the weeks before them had: stretching endless, passing in the blink of an eye, showing, more than anything, that time was a concept, a theory, as poorly understood as every other, so complex that it could not be tied down neatly and expected to remain in place. Jackie had two jobs, held two things close, and allowed the

rest to fall away. She let everything else fade to background, cut herself off from wonder, didn't stop to think why she could've sworn she'd caught the sound of familiar voices on the air, ones that belonged to different woods and a different time.

She simply kept track of her people: of Sadie and Callie, of Shauna and Van, of Tai and Nat and Lottie and Misty, and she counted the bodies that fell.

One: another man, dragging an injured woman with him by her elbow, who was seemingly chased by something that Jackie couldn't see into a bear trap that sprang tight, trapping him just beneath the knee. Tai the closest, shooting him square in the back of the head, his misery quick to end.

Two: the woman he had led back to them, shot in the heart by the only one of them who could've managed that aim, Nat cursing under her breath as she reloaded.

Three: another woman—older and slower, but able to remain unseen amongst the chaos as she crawled toward them on hands and knees—who grabbed Jackie's ankle, her eyes wide with something closer to fervor than terror, her mouth open in the first breath of a question, when Shauna pulled her away and slashed her throat, quick and clean.

Four: a man who stumbled straight into Misty, seeming almost to impale himself on her knife, rather than be stabbed by her.

Five: a woman shouting *please* into the night, facing away from them, her eyes locked on something in the distance, who backed up close enough for Lottie to force the air out of her lungs with one swift movement of the knife clutched in her hand.

Six: a person so consumed by fire that the smell wrinkled Jackie's nose before she saw them run closer, someone who must've fallen completely into the bonfire to light up like that. Jackie clutched Sadie and Callie close to her, finally let herself hear their surroundings, the screams of the others, frenzied and chaotic, the sobs of the girls, now muffled by her coat where they'd both taken easily to burying their faces, the crackle of fire, and the boom of the shot that Van took to end it once and for all.

And, with that, it was over. The not quite human, not quite animal noises were gone. There were no more cult members running through the woods. There was, finally, just them.

Nat and Tai doused the flames, but Jackie wasn't sure how. She was only vaguely aware of their discussion as they did so, and she couldn't bring herself to look. She felt herself shaking from head to toe, noticed that she was trembling the way one would notice something about their surroundings, feeling so far removed from her body. She fought it, tried to maintain some presence, squeezed Sadie and Callie tight and kept her eyes shut even tighter.

Then she felt Shauna. She didn't have to look; she knew Shauna's touch, knew it was Shauna's hands on her hips, Shauna's chest pressed against her back, Shauna's lips placing a series of kisses against the back of her head, Shauna's arm wrapping around her to find Callie's shoulder.

"It's over," Shauna whispered, and Jackie came back into herself, felt the ache of her muscles and the cold burned tears on her cheeks and the steadiness of her feet on the earth. 'It's over. It's okay,' Shauna repeated. "We're all okay."

“We have to call the police,” Tai said, as she finally stepped out of the cabin.

Each of them had swept it in turn for anything incriminating, all of them trusting each other innately with their lives, but less so with matters like these.

(“I still think maybe we should just burn it down,” Jackie had said, Shauna’s coat wrapped around her shoulders, her eyes heavy with exhaustion, her frame so small beneath it all that Shauna had to repress the urge to immediately cease crime scene curation and find her a snack, “y’know, just to be safe.”)

“We have to drive out to get service,” Nat said. “Won’t the cops be able to tell it’s been hours?”

“That CSI shit isn’t real.” Tai rolled her eyes. “They can barely tell their asses from their elbows, they won’t know down to the minute.”

Tai had been right, as she nearly always was. Shauna, like the rest of them, was on autopilot for most of it. The anxiety didn’t kick in during the hike out. It didn’t kick in during the overcrowded ride in the van to the trailhead, nor during the reunion with Jeff. It made itself known only when Taissa made the 911 call and, even then, it was marginal, a whole lot of nothing compared to everything else they’d done. Tai was so calm, so even, so careful, that it made it hard to worry about any possible repercussions.

Shauna was not the right person to speak during situations like these. She knew it, just as she’d known all those years ago that she wasn’t meant to use firearms. She had served her purpose in this. She had done what she needed to do. Everyone was safe, and the threats were gone in the only way they truly could be: every last one of them was dead. So, Shauna didn’t try to speak to the 911 operator, like Misty did, forcing Tai to hold up a finger and walk three paces away.

She didn’t allow herself to wonder what had happened back there, just as she had never allowed herself to wonder what had happened back in the first set of woods. It didn’t matter. The outcome was the same. It helped that Callie had decided not to ask too many questions, that she seemed content simply to sit near Shauna in silence, ignoring her father’s rapidfire speech the same exact way Shauna was.

And Shauna certainly didn’t try to speak when the cops arrived, two idiots with one brain cell between them and no concept of what they had wandered into. She did as she’d done years ago—not twenty-five, but thirty—and allowed Jackie to speak for her, feeling nothing about that other than sweet, beautiful relief.

The cops had no idea what to do with them. They weren’t used to this sort of thing, and who was, really? There was no practiced protocol for this on their end, just as there was no easy way to explain that, a few miles into the woods, there were dozens of bodies of people who had been killed in a myriad of ways that ranged from brutal to very brutal, that everyone here had survived the blood bath and just thought maybe the police ought to know. And, oh, who was this woman taking turns with New Jersey state senator elect Taissa Turner—whom the idiot cops recognized not by virtue of her political career, but by virtue of her high school soccer stint—to rattle off information at them? Why, that was none other than dead homecoming queen Jackie Taylor, but there would be time for that later.

It was almost funny, watching them try to make decisions: how much backup did they need (every available unit, but they decided *not to get ahead of themselves*, whatever that meant); whether they should go check the scene now, in case there were potential survivors (yes, but they decided not to); whether they should send out a search and rescue team now, or wait for morning (now, but they decided morning, since *the sun would be rising in an hour or two anyway).* It was a true display of idiocracy, of, Shauna thought, the very reasons it took nineteen months for them to be found out there.

For the first time since Callie was a little girl, Shauna allowed her to nod off with her head on her shoulder, as they waited for a decision. The only decision that was made that night by those cops with any sort of certainty was that everyone sitting or standing or pacing in the gravel lot by the trailhead needed to come into the station for questioning. And, even then, their ability to solidify the details left much to be desired.

"Okay, so how are you going to get us all there?" Jackie asked the officers, one hand on the back of her hip and the other waving at their car, its lights still flashing jarring, unnatural red and blue. "There are two of you and one car between you. Are we all walking together, or do you think maybe you should let us take our own cars?"

The small town cops exchanged slack-jawed looks, as they decided whether they would rather walk ten miles than admit a woman was correct.

Jeff drove the girls to the station. They had remained present through the entire ordeal, despite the women trying to convince them to leave, to head to a rest stop or a hotel or even The Manor. The women had known it was futile as they'd said the words. Those girls would do whatever they wanted, and Jackie couldn't help but be proud of the choices they made, even if those choices pained her.

Callie and Sadie had agreed easily that it was for the best to omit their presence during the thick of it, to go along with the story that Tai had listened to Jeff and Midori rehearse until she was certain that they were ready. They were all hostages in equal measure, and members of this violent, crazed cult had been watching them, Callie and Sadie and Midori and Jeff, from the moment they released Callie to them. They were told they'd be shot, and all of the women sacrificed, rather than just Jackie, if they did so much as move too quickly. Their phones had been taken away. (It was Sadie who had thought of that, gathering them up and stashing them fifty yards from the trailhead, next to the jacket that one of them had given Callie to wear, and two half empty water bottles. Again, this meant both pride and fear for Jackie, but she didn't think she could handle interrogating that just now.)

The cops were easy to manage, and there was nothing worth noting said between them. Taissa ensured the arrival of lawyers who practiced criminal defense, rather than land use. Jackie let the cops' mindless banter, their questionable decision making, their embarrassing lack of critical thought fall in one ear and out the other, listening only well enough to give a vague response when one was required of her. There was something to this, to surviving the way they had, that allowed for a sense of inviolability. Jackie wasn't stupid. She knew there was a long road ahead, for her and her death certificate and her years of name changes and off-grid living especially. But this, unlike being stranded in the wilderness, unlike being separated from her very heart for most of her life, unlike being stalked by a crazed cult that

put the fan in fanatical, was nothing that a sizable sum of money spent on lawyers and some carefully calculated smooth talking couldn't fix. It was a problem for later, and it was one she had no doubt she could face.

The only thing that mattered about the hours they spent in the shitty little joke of a police station was that, in the end, they were declared free to go. And so they went, leaving—without much fanfare—a night, a month, an era of their lives to come to a close.

Sadie fell naturally into the shitty van when they were finally released to go their own way—of course she did, Shauna thought, because of course the one person they would've deemed the least likely of all of them to have a kid was the only one who seemed to actually be decent at it—and her girlfriend fell in naturally after her. Shauna began doing frantic seat math, calculations that she hadn't done since high school, trying to assess who would be booted, who would be in the less desirable car, what the odds were that Jackie would be riding separately from her. She hadn't needed to worry about that then. She wasn't quite sure why she had, now that she had the clarifying distance of time. Jackie had clung to Shauna. Jackie had counted the seats in the car and then recounted. Jackie had saved her bus seats and bleacher seats and cafeteria seats their entire childhoods. She had pulled Shauna into her lap, or flopped down on Shauna's—in boys' cars, in friends' basements, wherever she had to in order to avoid being separated from Shauna by the seemingly unbearable, threatening distance of one car behind or three seats down.

This seat math was the kind Shauna ought to have done throughout Callie's childhood. She ought to have actually had PTA mom friends, to have driven Callie's classmates to games or the mall or wherever else kids went now. But she hadn't done that. None of it. Her minivan was aspirational, something Callie poked fun at when Shauna found reasons not to haul her friends around with her. *(I'm an only child, Mom, why do you even have this thing, then?)*

So, this was the first time in a long time she'd done seat math, and it felt far more serious than it had when they were teens. Shauna was choking on it, on the knowledge that she would have to let Jackie out of her sight eventually, that a promise Jackie had made through tears and through moans and syllables forced out on gasping, stuttering breaths, one that Shauna had coaxed her into, wouldn't last in the real world and its mundane demands.

"Shauna," Jeff said, the driver side door of his shitty sedan half open, his hand tight around the handle. "What's the hold up?"

Shauna squeezed her hands tight, and realized suddenly that she held Jackie's wrist in one of them. Jackie shifted with enough force to trade her wrist for her own hand, but she leaned in closer to Shauna as she did it, letting Shauna know that she was there, that she wasn't leaving, and Shauna wanted to say *thank you* out loud, but she knew how off that would sound, so she kept her mouth pressed shut.

"Jackie can ride with us," Callie said. "Right, Dad?"

Jeff set his jaw.

Shauna's hands shook, and she found herself slipping. She found herself becoming the woman she'd been months ago, the one she'd shoved herself into like the hide of an animal

during a hunt. Not fierce like a predator, but wide-eyed and terrified like prey. She was the woman who chided her daughter into behaving at the dinner table, so that her husband wouldn't get pissed off. The woman who was—though she'd never have admitted it at the time, not if faced with perjury or with torture—genuinely afraid for her husband to find out that she'd dinged the bumper on the stupid fucking minivan. She had been so many things for so many years, and while she hadn't strictly feared Jeff finding out about the affair, while she'd sort of wanted him to know at times, there were other times where Shauna had felt herself becoming her mother. Shrinking, placating, offering her husband every convenience on a platter: a clean home, a closet that seemed to magically replenish itself, a carefully curated stern look that would shut their daughter up so as not to distress him, a body for him to grab and to fuck and to toss aside when he wasn't interested.

Shauna hadn't gotten that way because he'd forced her to be. Shauna had remembered that over the past month, slowly but surely, with her knife buried to the hilt in a ribcage, with her fingers buried to the knuckle in a woman whimpering her name between hiccuping gasps. Shauna had gotten that way because Jeff had been a tool in the prison of her own design. But things had changed. Her sentence had been twenty-five, rather than life.

Shauna's hands shook at her side, but only for the briefest of moments. Before Jeff could speak, she clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, gave a sharp roll of her eyes just as he parted his lips to no doubt equivocate uselessly, to drag everyone along in his quest to pretend that he got to make the decisions, that any woman's idea must be warped and repackaged and branded as his own.

"I haven't slept for shit in three days," Shauna said, "but if you're just going to stand there I guess I can drive."

She held out her hand for the keys, more than ready to snatch them from his hand and leave him there, stranded at the Bendock Sheriff's Department.

"No," he muttered, defeated. "I'll drive. Let's go."

He looked at Jackie, and she gave him the most forced smile Shauna had ever seen. Jeff didn't notice, because while he was looking at her—staring intently, in a way that Shauna didn't like, a way that made her repeat the promise she'd made to Jackie in her head like a mantra: *I won't kill anyone else ever again* —he wasn't actually seeing her. He never had.

The car was quiet. Music didn't feel right, not now, and there was so much to think about that Shauna felt she had her own talk radio hammering inside her skull, the only station that got signal.

It had all happened so fast. There was no explanation. No grand manifesto, no villain monologue from Willow. But, Shauna thought, that was the way it went in real life. She'd learned that long ago. There could be shocking violence, lives taken, ritual acts built, but they would always end as swiftly as they'd seemed to begin. They happened with a thrill, with a rush of adrenaline and a one-mindedness that made it feel as though they would change everything, as though they would stretch endless and consume one's life, as though no one who survived them would ever be able to exist apart from them again, and then they would end. And, when they ended, there was wood that needed splitting and fires to be stoked. Even apart from the wilderness, it was much the same. There were groceries to be bought, dinner to be prepared. There were jokes to be made, new books that sounded interesting. There was

sleep and sex and all the soft stuff in life, and none of it vanished just because something fucking crazy had happened.

Shauna still had a husband who she needed to divorce, a daughter who she needed to repair her relationship with, a soulmate, in the truest, most beautifully terrifying sense of the word, who she would crawl into bed with that night, just as she had every other night, just as she would every night until her last. What had been true then was true now, would be true long after Shauna was dead and buried: if you were lucky enough to be breathing at the end of it all, life always went on.

"You okay?" Jackie whispered.

Shauna opened her eyes just long enough to look at her and smile. "Tired."

Jackie stroked Shauna's hair off of her forehead and nodded. "Sleep," she said. "It's a long drive."

Shauna could feel Jeff's eyes on them in the rearview mirror. She ignored the challenge, perhaps even relished in it a bit. She sank into Jackie without having to look, knowing the exact way Jackie's arms would be open for her, waiting for her, as though no time at all had passed between drunken nights out with Jeff driving and Randy in shotgun and the two of them in the back. Shauna had always been the one who fell asleep. Jackie had been too alert, too hypervigilant in public to ever let herself nod off, even more aware when Jeff was around, which Shauna could have understood the reason for even back then, had she not been drowning in jealous, blinding, possessive love. Jackie had always stayed awake, and she'd always encouraged Shauna's habit of sleeping, always offered to be Shauna's pillow in one way or another, to let her own body serve as an entire bed for Shauna, her arms wrapping around her like a comforter, whenever she could manage to get the angle right and the audience limited.

Things had changed, though. Of course they had. Shauna waited to hear one more quiet snore from Callie, who had stepped into the passenger seat automatically, even though she never had done so with both her parents in the car in her life, as though she was well aware that Shauna wouldn't part from Jackie, not even a few feet. Shauna could trust Jeff just enough to have no initiative, to drive along the road exactly as he was told, followed by the van carrying the others. And, above all else, she could trust Jackie to ensure that he didn't veer off course by even one inch. Because Jackie was different now, so very different than Shauna had imagined she could be, but she was the same in all the ways that counted. She kissed the crown of Shauna's head, as though in agreement with her thoughts, and Shauna drifted off in her arms.

The only place to land after something like this was The Manor, and there was plenty of room to spare for the people they'd picked up along the way. Sadie and Midori took the room Sadie always had, when she wasn't tucked into bed with one of them. Jackie led Callie to the room closest to her and Shauna's, and Van pointed Jeff to the smallest room in the house, just next to Callie's, with a clipped *"here"* that made it clear exactly how bizarre it was for them to have a man present here.

They didn't talk about it, as they got ready to sleep. There was nothing to be said that couldn't wait for a few hours. Jackie felt herself nodding off in the shower even as she stood, felt Shauna stand close behind her and prop her up, run fingers through her hair and make quick work of rinsing her off.

"You won't go back with him?" Jackie asked, in a moment of pure, self-conscious weakness.

"Jax," Shauna said, dropping a long kiss to her shoulder, "never. Never anyone but you."

Jackie nodded, so exhausted that she barely noticed Shauna cutting off the water, drying her with a towel, dressing her in a tee shirt and pajama bottoms. Shauna laying her in their bed, drawing each heavy curtain closed until it felt like blissful, peaceful night in their room, before slipping in beside her.

"I love you," Shauna said, and Jackie had just enough strength in her to say it back, before she gave herself over fully to sleep.

She woke with a start, no idea whether she'd slept for minutes or hours, to the sound of padding feet and a creak outside the door. She gasped into Shauna's neck and jerked her head up and back, just far enough to loosen Shauna's hair that had been clinging to her lips and to free both of her ears to listen closer. More padding feet, slower now, as though their owner had lost some resolve. Jackie committed to waking, propping herself up on her elbow and switching the bedside lamp on. She realized somewhere in the motions that she was waiting for Sadie to let herself in and slip into bed, mumbling something about a nightmare.

Until she remembered, with a slight chill, that Sadie was twenty. That Midori was here and they were curled up in the bedroom they always took, the one that Nat had stayed in before she'd started sleeping in the master with Lottie, and that Sadie would know the other half of Jackie's bed was occupied.

There was no knock, but Jackie could hear a different sort of creak, this time nearly imperceptible, the telltale sound of shifting weight on the old floorboards that meant someone who wasn't Sadie was still waiting there, lurking outside their bedroom.

"Shauna," Jackie whispered roughly, giving her shoulder a gentle shake.

"Mmm," Shauna hummed. She was still unconscious, doing her very best to prove wrong all of Jackie's comments over the years on what a light sleeper she was. She shifted, even in her sleep, to grip Jackie's hip tighter.

"Shauna!" Jackie infused her tone with more urgency, shook Shauna hard enough that her pillow eclipsed more and less of her perfect, stubborn face in rocking waves.

It only took three shakes. Shauna's eyes snapped open, comically wide, if you omitted the fear.

"Jackie?" She searched Jackie's face, commenced the routine frantic press of her hands across as much of Jackie's body as she could reach, and seemed to settle almost instantly into deciding that nothing could be too wrong.

"Lay down, baby. S'early." Shauna tried to pull Jackie back down, whining when Jackie didn't budge. "Jax, I'm tired, what's—"

“Somebody’s at the door,” Jackie whispered, jerking her head toward it.

The floorboards creaked again, but this time the sound traveled in a way that indicated footsteps in retreat. Jackie saw recognition in Shauna’s eyes—the kind that belonged to a mother, the kind that Jackie was so fucking relieved to see in action on Shauna’s beautiful, sleep-swollen face.

“Cal?” Shauna called out, quiet enough to avoid disturbing anyone in the rooms near them, but loud enough for Callie to hear her clearly.

“Uh… y-yes, I… um…” Jackie heard the doorknob jostle slightly, but Callie didn’t seem to be sure whether she could open it.

“It’s unlocked, honey,” Jackie said. “Come in.”

Callie pushed the door open a crack, peering around it. Her eyes were watery and her cheeks were splotchy. She’d so clearly been crying. Jackie wanted to jump up and hug her, but she knew that she needed to control herself. Needed to let Shauna be the one to comfort her.

“Hi,” Callie mumbled. She pulled her sleeves over her hands and twisted the material between her fingers, in the exact way Shauna had at her age. “I just… couldn’t sleep because… well, Dad—he—he snores and I can hear it from my room, and it’s, like, totally miserable.”

“The worst,” Shauna agreed automatically.

Jackie swallowed down her irrational jealousy (more like performed the mental equivalent of beating it into submission with a bat) and waited. The waiting was fucking killing her, but Shauna was slower with these things, and that was okay. That had to be okay.

“Come sit,” Jackie said, something small and innocuous, or at least as much so as she could handle.

She patted the bed and Callie walked closer slowly, eyeing Shauna carefully. Shauna nodded once. Callie sank down at the foot of the bed, tucking her legs beneath her, looking so like a teenage Shauna in her oversized shirt and her baggy sweats, her dark hair falling in her eyes, eclipsing half her face as she stared down at the floor.

“Are you okay, Cal?” Shauna asked—a little forced, a little formal, but Callie latched on.

“They… they took me out of my bed,” Callie admitted softly. “When I was asleep.”

“Oh, Callie,” Jackie said.

“And we’ve been sleeping in shifts in the car since then, so this is the first time I’ve had to sleep in a bed and it’s just, like, totally creeping me out,” Callie said. “And Dad is useless, but… you’re, like, a total badass, Mom. So I was wondering if I could sleep on the floor or something, maybe? In here with you?”

“Oh!” Shauna said, clearly shocked, but cautiously pleased to be needed. “Not the floor, honey. There’s… maybe we could drag another mattress in? Jackie, is there—”

“Just get in bed with us, sweetie.” Jackie said, scooting to the far edge to make room. Shauna and Callie blinked at her, speechless and motionless. “Or… I’m sorry, that’s probably weird with me here, right? I could go sleep on the couch downstairs, you two should—”

“No,” Shauna and Callie said, together.

Callie blushed, and Jackie’s heart broke as she remembered the words Callie had sobbed into her shoulder in that damp, crowded shed: *you don’t understand, she loves you more than me.*

“It’s a big bed,” Shauna said. “There’s room, Cal… if—if you want.”

Shauna shifted closer to Jackie, making room for Callie beside her.

Jackie turned out the light and, with the darkness, Callie finally broke, crying quietly into her pillow. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

“It’s okay,” Shauna said.

At the same time as Jackie insisted: “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I thought you were going to die, Mom,” Callie whispered, barely loud enough for Jackie to hear.

“I know.” Shauna squeezed Callie’s shoulder. ‘It was… fucking scary. I’m so sorry. But it’s over. We’re okay.’ Jackie nestled into Shauna’s back, nodding against her. “I promise, everything’s going to be so much better now.”

“So,” Nat said, flopping down on the sofa between Lottie and Misty, “what’s the plan now?”

“We deal with the fallout as it comes.” Tai shrugged, pouring herself a cup of coffee—her first for the day, rather than her fifth or sixth. “But I think we’re officially playing a defense only game, at this point.”

“Amen to that,” Van said with a grin, her hand finding the small of Taissa’s back.

Shauna sighed, playing absentmindedly with Jackie’s hair, feeling the silk of it twist and untwist around her fingers. “I can’t believe we pulled that off.”

“I can,” Lottie said. “We’ve always been capable of so much.”

Jackie snorted, and Shauna let her eyes fall into a roll, unsuccessful in preventing a smile from pulling at her own cheeks.

“We’ve got to stay in close contact,” Misty said, shifting in her seat, in a tone that told Shauna she’d be whipping out a poster board filled with all the reasons why, should anyone disagree.

“Don’t worry, Misty.” Nat patted her knee, equal parts placating and kind. “Don’t think we could avoid it if we wanted to.”

“Let’s stay one more night,” Jackie said, sitting up straighter, her mug clutched tight between her hands, her eyes lit up with a kind of excitement that felt snagged from another era, another life. “The girls are gone, fucking Jeff is gone—”

“Thank God,” Nat muttered under her breath. “Asshole still owes me fifty fucking grand.”

“I told you, Natalie,” Lottie said, “I’ll—”

“It’s the *principle*, Lot!”

“We have lives to get back to,” Jackie said, louder, ‘or… to *get* to,’ she corrected, shifting closer to Shauna, settling nearly on top of her, “but they can wait one more day. Let’s just… let’s stay here. One more night.”

“One more night,” Tai agreed. “But, Misty, I am *not* watching any fucking musicals, so don’t start.”

“Who hasn’t seen *Cats?”* Misty asked. “Seriously, it’s a classic, if you’d just—”

“We’re not watching *Cats,”* Nat groaned. “Van, pass me the remote.”

“If anyone should pick the movie,” Van said, snatching the remote and clutching it close to her chest, “it’s me.”

“You’re good with that, right?” Jackie asked, her voice in Shauna’s ear just loud enough to transform the others’ banter into nothing more than a soothing rumble in the background.

“Yeah,” Shauna said, kissing her long enough and deep enough that Nat had to launch a pillow at the back of her head to break them apart. “I’m good with that.”